# Rogues

By R. H. Sherard

Chatto & Windus, Piccadilly

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# ROGUES.

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BY

R. H. SHERARD

London
CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY
1889

To his Friend

RICHARD WHITEING

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# CONTENTS.


| CHAPTER | | PAGE |
|---|---|---|
| I. | REGINA *v.* BACKHOUSE | 1 |
| II. | NO. 75, DUCHESS STREET | 13 |
| III. | THE TRUST-MONEY | 27 |
| IV. | THE FIRST BREACH | 41 |
| V. | MY MISERABLE WEAKNESS | 51 |
| VI. | PEARLS BEFORE SWINE | 65 |
| VII. | RUINED | 68 |
| VIII. | INCOHERENT | 81 |
| IX. | MORE ROGUERY | 91 |
| X. | BLACK JOE AND 'THE YARD' | 101 |
| XI. | DEEPER DEPTHS | 110 |
| XII. | WHAT ROGUES! WHAT ROGUES! | 121 |

# ROGUES.

## CHAPTER I.

### REGINA *v.* BACKHOUSE.

About four years ago, I was in the enjoyment of many of those things which make a man's life a happy one. I was a widower, and had only one child, a son, who at that time was twenty years of age. I was earning a comfortable income at the bar, and stood well in professional and social repute. My only recent sorrow had been the violent death of my dear brother Richard, who had been foully murdered at Trouville. His murderer had never been discovered, nor could any reason be assigned for the crime. I have always suspected that he came by his end at the hands of a vulgar garrotter, for he was found strangled one morning on the boarded walk that leads from the Hôtel des Roches Noires to the Casino. His watch and a valuable ring had been stolen, but the other things which he had in his pockets at the time had been left untouched. Amongst these was a formal will, by which he constituted me his sole heir. There was little consolation in this—if, indeed, I could have found consolation for the fearful sorrow of his loss under such circumstances—for poor Richard Wilson left nothing behind him but some trifling debts, which I very gladly paid.

I might also have complained about my son. His conduct was far from satisfactory, and I was bitterly disappointed in my early hopes about him when he grew up.

Always of an indolent disposition, he manifested in the first years of his manhood a very strong repulsion for all work. The solicitor to whom I had articled him was loud in his complaints about his apprentice's idleness and want of care. His studies he totally neglected, made frequent absences from his office, and wasted his valuable time in frivolous and mischievous amusements about town.

But nothing is easier for a man than to find reasons for complaint against his lot. Mine, all things considered, was not one that with fairness I could grumble at; on the contrary, and especially when I compare it with what I have since undergone, I had every cause to congratulate myself on the ease, comfort and carelessness of the life I was then leading.

My chambers were in Lincoln's Inn, and it was here one morning that my clerk handed me a brief from Messrs. Spedding and Co., my earliest and most constant patrons. Messrs. Spedding and Co. made a speciality of criminal cases, and had a great reputation amongst the dangerous classes.

'It does not seem at all a good business,' said my clerk, as he laid the manuscript on my table. 'I hardly liked to take it, as I know, sir, how you object to speak in losing cases; but I did not care to refuse it without your permission, as I know how glad you are to oblige Mr. Spedding. So I marked it double your ordinary fee for work of this kind, half for the trouble and half to compensate for the verdict, which is certain to go against your client.'

A very short study of the brief for the prisoner in Regina *v.* Backhouse sufficed to show me that my employé's opinion was a right one, and that there was little or no chance of my eloquence being expended to any good purpose.

William Backhouse—he had many aliases, which it is unnecessary to mention—had been discovered one night in the back-garden of a house in Putney. He had been found to be equipped with all the tools necessary for house-breaking, and had aggravated the charge against him

by opposing a violent resistance to the policeman who had interfered with his arrangements. The only favourable point was that no previous conviction was known to be recorded against him. This, however, was but a slight extenuation, as he was a man of fifty-one, and juries are not as a rule inclined to believe that a man of a stainless past can turn to house-breaking at this advanced age. I knew, moreover, that the judge who was to sit on this case at the approaching sessions (the trial having been fixed to take place at the Old Bailey) had, of all English judges, a wonderful way of counteracting any sentimental appeals that might be addressed to the jury under his presidency. Fact and fact only was taken into consideration in his short summing-up; and in this case the facts were entirely against my client. So little chance, indeed, did there appear to me of my being able to get a favourable verdict, that, but for my regard for the solicitors who had sent me the brief, I should certainly have washed my hands of William Backhouse and of all connected with him. On the other hand, the case was a very easy one, and could be thoroughly 'got up' in a very short time and with little study. The fee was also a good one. I decided that it would be foolish to put it into the pocket of one of my too numerous rivals, and that after all more than three-fourths of the criminals arraigned are condemned.

I was noting down the few points I could urge in Mr. Backhouse's favour—and very few they were—when Mr. Spedding called on me.

He had come to consult with me about another case in which I also held the prisoner's brief. It was a murder case, and the details were sufficiently complicated to hold out some hopes of success. I had also firm faith in the innocence of the woman charged with the crime, and had prepared what I considered a very strong defence. Mr. Spedding, however, came to tell me that the girl had that morning confessed her guilt to him, and was resolute in her determination to plead guilty. The solicitor had in vain urged on her the suicidal folly of such a course, and had

wasted more than two hours in endeavouring to persuade her to profit by the chances of a trial. She had expressed great remorse, and had said that while she should be prepared to undergo a just retribution for her sin, she had hopes that her youth and her penitence might secure her a recommendation to mercy.

'What rubbish!' I cried; 'why, the girl is mad! What jury in England would couple a recommendation to mercy with a guilty verdict in such a case? Remorse is a very pretty thing no doubt, but British judges and juries have a way of thinking that it ought to be displayed before the crime instead of after. She's a dead woman if she pleads guilty.'

'I got sick of telling her so,' answered Mr. Spedding, 'but she fancies it is her only chance. There is no hope of her changing her mind, especially as her trial comes off in a week. It's a thousand pities. Such a strong defence as we have, too! I was certain of an acquittal. Our only hope is to get a verdict of manslaughter. Plead her youth, her penitence, her stainless past, and try to knock the premeditation out of the charge.'

After some conversation on this subject, Mr. Spedding asked me my opinion on the Backhouse case. I told him what I thought about it. He smiled at my pessimistic views, but agreed that it was indeed very bad.

'What sort of man is he in appearance?' I asked; 'some burly ruffian, I suppose. Bill Sikes every square inch, eh? The sort of prisoner that is condemned the moment he appears at the bar.'

'Oh no,' answered Mr. Spedding, 'he looks anything but a burglar. A most gentlemanly man. He has an excellent appearance, polite manners, and speaks remarkably well. He seems to have had a very good education, and knows several foreign languages.'

'Unfortunately,' I answered, 'all the foreign languages in the world won't, I fear, talk down Police Constable Maxwell's evidence, and polite manners are only looked at with suspicion in a man who enters people's back-gardens at night

armed with a jemmy, etc. The jury will see a swindler or a forger behind the burglar. Still, his appearance may help. Did he favour you with any observations or suggestions?'

'None that I thought worthy of being taken into consideration. He talked some nonsense about our telling the jury it was all a lark, a bet, or something. Such a defence would, of course, have been too ridiculous, especially considering how he fought with the police when he was taken.'

'And his past?' I added; 'I see that no witnesses as to character are to be called.'

'He refuses to give me any information on his past life, and will not help us in this respect at all. But I doubt if his history would be an edifying one. A respectable man does not take to house-breaking at that age. No, our only plea is the one of first offence. You must go for a mitigation of the sentence. If you can get him off with five years' penal servitude I shall consider that you have done very well, and that he has every reason to be grateful to you.'

'Well, that is an encouraging remark,' I answered, 'I utterly despaired of more. These assizes are nothing to look forward to with pleasure. Two certain condemnations, and two other doubtful cases. I shall lose all my reputation.'

'Not with us, Mr. Wilson,' said Mr. Spedding, holding out his hand; 'certainly not with us. And we have always plenty for you to do.'

'By-the-bye,' he added, turning round as he reached the door, 'are you going to the Whissendine sale? There is that lovely Corot. It will be put up this afternoon.'

'Don't tempt me,' I cried, 'I am ruining myself with my hobby. I couldn't afford even the frame at present.'

He laughed at this, but it was true, nevertheless. For some years I had had a mania for collecting works of art, and had spent money extravagantly on my little gallery. It contained many beautiful and valuable pictures, doubtless, but it had also absorbed not only my small private fortune, but the surplus of my income for many years past. I had a rich collection of pictures, but a very small balance at my

bankers. However, I was earning a good income, was comparatively young, and had very few other claims on my purse. I considered that this justified me in satisfying my taste. When it occurred to me that I might fall ill, and perhaps by some untoward accident be prevented from pursuing my vocation and thus lose my income entirely, I consoled myself with the thought that my gallery was worth, and would always realize, a considerable sum, and was in that respect as good as money in the bank. Friends, it is true, had pointed out the fallacy of this argument from a commercial point of view, urging that money invested is productive, that a picture is not, and that thus a picture bought for a thousand pounds costs its owner an additional fifty pounds for each year that he keeps it. To this I used to reply that it brought me more than fifty pounds' worth of enjoyment, and was therefore an excellent speculation. The fact remained, nevertheless, that in all but artistic enjoyment I was undoubtedly poor.

This made my son's irregular conduct all the more distressing. It was with the greatest difficulty I could satisfy his repeated demands for cash. It would certainly have been wiser to refuse him what I knew too well was spent in dissipation, but then he was my only son. I could not be hard on him, and I always hoped that sooner or later he would grow tired of his pleasures and definitely abandon them. Then again, it gave me satisfaction to see him always well dressed. He had excellent taste, and made a good figure in his fashionable attire. Nor had I any direct proof that he spent my money in vicious pleasures, a strong suspicion only. According to his own account he was member of several athletic and social clubs, and this I knew entailed great expense. For these many reasons, I could not find it in my heart to refuse him what he asked, though it caused me frequent anxiety and occasional annoyance.

Mr. Spedding had been hardly gone ten minutes when Robert, my son, came into my rooms. I could see at once, from his manner, what was the object of his visit. Now, I had made a very strong resolution to refuse him any further

supplies that month, and so I put on a stern expression, feeling, nevertheless, in the drawer of my table for my cheque-book.

'I say, papa,' he cried, not at all disconcerted by my serious face, 'you must give me a cheque to-day! I want it awfully.'

'Yes,' I answered, 'but I want awfully to know what you are doing out of your office at this hour?'

'Oh!' he cried, 'didn't I tell you? I am invited to a lawn-tennis party down at Richmond this afternoon. At the Walkers'.'

'But you don't want a cheque to pay your ticket down there, I suppose.'

'No. I have to pay some debts—my tailor; and then there are some bets I lost, and——'

'Debts! tailor! bets!' I cried. 'Why, how much do you want?'

'Twenty pounds, at least,' he answered.

'Twenty pounds!' I cried.

I then proceeded to deliver a very severe lecture on his extravagance and general bad conduct. He took it all with an excellent grace, professed repentance and a sincere intention to amend when once he was out of these scrapes, and finally got me to sign him a draft for the amount.

I gave it to him with a sigh. It was just the fee I was to receive for defending Rose Smedley against the charge of murder—the price, perhaps, of a woman's salvation. This, with all the moral to be extracted therefrom, I did not fail to point out to him; but he was now very much less attentive than before, and hurried off as soon as I had ceased speaking.

From my window I could see him cross the street and jump into an elegant Forder cab that was in waiting. I am sorry to say that a much over-dressed young person was also in waiting for him in the cab, with whom he drove off gaily.

On the following day I received another visit from Mr. Spedding. He came to make me a somewhat unusual

proposition. It appeared that he had that morning received a letter from William Backhouse in prison, in which the burglar begged to be allowed an interview with the barrister who was to defend him at his trial. He added that he had some important disclosures to make, and that he could and would make them to me alone. On receipt of this request, Mr. Spedding had gone round to Newgate, and had, in vain, pointed out to the prisoner the irregularity of any such proceeding.

'I told him,' added the solicitor, 'that any disclosures he might wish to make should be made to me; that counsel could not be troubled or disturbed about such matters. But it was throwing words away. He desires to see you, and insists that what he has to tell you is of sufficient importance to excuse his importuning you. I told him that all I could do would be to express his wish to you. He gives us a great deal too much trouble, I think.'

'It is an extraordinary request,' I replied; 'but I am not unwilling to comply with it; I am anxious to see the man before the trial, and to judge how far his appearance will assist me in my defence. Will you kindly apply to the prison authorities for the necessary permission?'

'That I have already done. I thought that if the governor refused it, I should not need to trouble you about the matter at all. You will be conducted to Mr. Backhouse's apartment whenever you choose to present yourself at the door of the hotel—the Queen's Hotel.'

Having some time to spare that afternoon, I determined to utilize it for this interview, and accordingly set off at once to the Old Bailey. In less than a quarter of an hour after leaving Lincoln's Inn I found myself in Mr. Backhouse's cell.

I cannot say that I at all agreed with Mr. Spedding as to the man's favourable appearance, and any hopes I had had of turning his face to profitable account were dashed down as I looked at him for the first time.

In my eyes he had a decidedly sinister look, which was but intensified by the air of respectability under which he

evidently tried to conceal it. His eyes were small and close together, and their ugliness was increased by the entire absence of lashes. His hair, sparse and gray, was parted down the middle and carefully plastered down on each side. But the most repulsive feature in his face was his chin, which was of extraordinary strength and development. He looked the sort of man who could lift cannon-balls up with his teeth, or dangle fantastically thereby from swinging trapezes. His body was small and slight, but his arms were of great length, and his hands were equipped with abnormally long fingers.

'No, I'm not a beauty to look at, I know,' he said, interpreting rightly the depreciative glance I cast at him as I entered his cell. 'But that has nothing to do with it,' he added, bringing me a stool to sit down upon. 'What I want to know is whether you are a gentleman—a real gentleman, now.'

'I hardly understand you,' I answered.

'Oh, you'll understand me right enough as we go on,' he replied. 'What I mean is, are you the sort of man to keep a promise?'

'Undoubtedly—if I pledge my word. But I warn you, I am not inclined to make any rash promises.'

'No more you shall.' So you are the barrister who is to defend me, are you? What chance have I of getting off? Devil a chance, I see by your looks. Well, so much the worse. It can't run to more than five years, I suppose?'

I could see by his manner as he spoke, and by the rapid and searching glances he cast on me, that he was trying to judge from my appearance whether he could trust me or not. It annoyed me considerably to be the subject of such speculation in such a man, and I interrupted him with an impatient gesture, saying:

'You have not called me here, I suppose, to talk about these things. My time is precious.'

'I wish mine was,' he replied. 'Well, I won't keep you long. Now, supposing I had a bit of property hidden away somewhere—a nice bit of property—and supposing that I,

being frightened lest it should get stolen during my absence —a five years' absence it is to be—was to ask you, as a gentleman of honour, to take care of it for me in case of my being sentenced——'

'I should refuse any such trust,' I exclaimed decisively; 'you can put the bit of property into your solicitor's hands, or ask a banker to take care of it!'

'Solicitor's hands!' he cried. 'Oh! I know all about that. No, that would never do. I should never see a farthing of it again. As to a banker, no banker would accept a deposit made in that way. And what means have I of communicating with a banker? No, sir, it must be you or nobody else. You cannot refuse me, sir,' he added. 'Why should you? What trouble will it give you? Will you not have some satisfaction in keeping it for me and in knowing that when I come out of gaol I shall have the means of leading an honest life?'

'It does not seem to have kept you out of mischief before,' I answered.

'Oh, you refer to the burglary. I give you my solemn word of honour, sir—and little as you may think it worth, I value it as much as you do yours—that I did not go out to rob that night, I cannot explain my motive for wishing to break into that house, but it was not to rob—at least, not as you think. Do you believe me?'

'Well, yes. It sounds strange, but we will consider that you entered Mr. Wolfe's garden with burglar's tools, but with the purest of motives. I am afraid the jury won't understand their purity.'

'And I don't care a rush whether they do. I am prepared to be sentenced. I don't mind that, though it is a hard punishment at my time of life. But what I do mind —and the thought of it nearly drives me crazy—is that, when I come out of gaol, I may be penniless. My money is hidden, where it may be found any day, and of course—finders, keepers—if it is found it will be lost. There is enough to keep me decently and quietly for the rest of my years. If I lose it I shall have no resource but crime. I

do not want to become a thief. I have been an honest man all my life. Yes, sir, an honest man. Now, if you would be so kind as to get it the day I am sentenced and to keep it for me—not in a bank, mind, that is not safe—till I come out, I shall be certain of being able to end my days as I have lived till now, as an honest and respectable citizen. Mr. Wilson, will you do this service for a poor afflicted man?'

The 'poor afflicted man' looked such a consummate villain as he made this request, that I had half a mind to refuse it then and there. But then, I reflected, how unjust it was to judge him by appearances, I remembered that his position and surroundings had doubtless prejudiced my mind against him, and I considered that perhaps, after all, he was as innocent of criminality as I myself. But before answering definitely, I determined to put to him a few questions.

'Where does this money come from?'

'It's my own. My savings.'

'How much is it?'

'About two thousand seven hundred pounds.'

'A large sum! How is it you carried such a sum about with you? One usually invests.'

'I don't. I did not care to run the risk. I spend a pound a week on myself. There was enough there to keep me sixty years. I have no friends, no relations, to whom I could leave money, and I don't see much good in posthumous charity.'

'But what guarantee have you?' I began.

'Of your honesty? None except your looks and your word. But I feel certain that my money would be as safe in your hands as in the Bank of England, nay, safer; and, knowing it is in your hands, I should be easy. I am terribly uneasy now.'

'Well,' I said, 'and supposing you should die in prison, what should I have to do with your money then?'

'You might keep it for yourself—I have no friends, no family. It would be a comfortable sum, even for you.'

'Decidedly a comfortable sum for me,' I thought, as I

remembered my terribly meagre balance. This last reflection decided the matter.

'I accept your offer,' I said. 'It is an extraordinary one, my dear sir, but I accept it. I should be sorry to stand in your way. Where is the money?'

I spoke this eagerly, and he looked at me with somewhat of suspicion. But after a minute's pause his face cleared.

He put his hand into his breast-pocket and drew out a sealed envelope, which he gave me, saying:

'Promise me not to open this until after my trial, and only then if I am sentenced. Of course, if I am acquitted I can take care of my money myself. It is safe till then.'

'I promise,' I said, taking the envelope.

'Thank you. Well, then, if I am condemned, open the envelope as soon after the trial as convenient. You will find in it the fullest particulars as to where my money is hidden. I would beg you then to lose no time in going to take it. But how glad I should be to be able to fetch it myself! You don't think I have any chance, do you, sir?'

I shook my head.

'I will do my best for you,' I said; 'but you must not hope for a favourable result.' The evidence is too much against you. But, perhaps,' I added, with rising curiosity, 'if you were to explain to me your motives——you say it was not to steal.'

'No, sir,' he replied decisively, 'that I cannot do. Not if it was to save my neck.'

'Very well,' I answered. 'Is there anything else?'

'No, thank you. Yes, stay. Is Mrs. Wolfe to be called as a witness? The wife, you know, of the man——'

'Yes, I know; the wife of the person in whose garden you were found. Yes, she has been subpœnaed. She saw you in the garden. She and the policeman are the two witnesses against you.'

'And she means to speak against me?' he cried bitterly. 'She means to help to send me to prison. Ah! it's incredible.'

'Do you know anything about her?' I asked, growing

more and more curious. 'Tell me. It may do you good. I may be able to do something then in the cross-examination. Don't be so blind to your own interests. Tell me the whole truth.'

He had mastered his rage, and answered me with a laugh. 'The truth, the whole truth, eh? Not likely. Not a word, sir. Not to save my neck. Certainly not to save myself five years' penal servitude. No, you must excuse me. Do not think I mistrust you, but I cannot tell you a word. And do not think I shall be disappointed or ungrateful if you fail to get me off. It's a dead certainty, I know. Only don't let me get more than five years, I couldn't stand more. Why, think, I shall be fifty-six when I come out. Even at that rate, I shall have little life left before me, and I have so much to do—so much to read, before my death. All Russian literature. I have not read one Russian book yet, though all other European literature I know pretty well.'

Was this man fooling me? I felt inclined to believe it. Was the whole thing a foolish mystification, a purportless practical joke? It seemed to me very probable. He knew 'all other European literature,' and yet how vulgar was his method of expressing himself. If I had been a psychologist I might have found in him an excellent study. But I was at that time a busy man, and so, having heard all I wanted or cared to hear, I took my departure, after repeating my promise and bidding him be of good heart. 'You shall have plenty of time for Russian literature,' I said, with a laugh, as I closed the door.

## CHAPTER II.

### NO. 75, DUCHESS STREET.

When next I saw Mr. Backhouse he was standing in the dock of the Central Criminal Court. He was carefully and neatly dressed, and behaved with much decorum and polite-

ness. I saw at once that both judge and jury were surprised at his appearance, though, as I had feared, it did not seem to prepossess them in his favour. He looked much too respectable. I felt very discouraged and out of spirits that day, for that morning my client Rose Smedley, who had pleaded guilty, had been condemned to death, and not a word of recommendation had been spoken in her behalf. I had also been able to judge from the way in which Lord B—— passed sentence on her, that she was irrevocably lost.

William Backhouse pleaded 'Not guilty,' in a firm voice, with a very pretty bow to his lordship.

The case was then proceeded with, and with great speed. The opening speech of the Treasury counsel barely occupied ten minutes. It was not a case for any doubt, he said; the prisoner had been taken *flagrante delicto*, and had made great resistance to the police. Nothing was known of his antecedents; luckily, no doubt, for him. He had given various names and addresses at the station. What did this imply if not that he had excellent reasons for concealing his true identity? The witnesses should tell the rest of this too common story.

Police-Constable Maxwell was then called. His evidence was clear and to the point.

'I was on duty on the night of the 2nd of last month,' he said. 'My beat lay on the east side of —— Road. The night had passed without any incident, till at two o'clock in the morning I noticed, in passing No. 52, the house occupied by Mr. Wolfe, that the gate of the front garden was open. This gate had been closed when I had passed it last. I swear that it was closed, for I had tried it. It was locked. It is my duty to try all doors and gates, and I had not neglected to do so that night. On finding it open, I penetrated into Mr. Wolfe's garden, and instituted a thorough search on the premises. The front was all in order; I found nothing to warrant my suspicions. Mr. Wolfe's house stands in a large garden, which surrounds it on all sides. The principal part is behind. After searching in front, I went to the back of the house. I then saw the prisoner

crouching beneath a bush of laurels. At the same time, one of the windows of the house was thrown up, and I heard Mrs. Wolfe crying, 'Murder! Thieves! Police!' I answered, 'All right, ma'am! Police is here!' and sprang forward to arrest the man. He jumped up as I came at him, and grappled with me. He looks a weak chap, but I can tell you, he nearly mastered me. He got his fingers round my throat and tried to strangle me, kicking me all the while most brutally on the shins; I have the wounds still. This gave me such pain that I was forced to let him go. He dashed off like lightning, I in pursuit. As I reached the gate of the garden, he turned round and flung a jemmy between my legs. This brought me down on my nose. But I was soon up again, and after him once more. But I doubt if I should have caught him, for he ran like a horse. Luckily he was stopped at the end of the road by Constable Horton, who held him till I came up. We got him to the station with the greatest difficulty. We found a skeleton key, and a dark lantern on him, also a purse containing fifty pounds. When he had been charged and locked up, I returned to No. 52, and picked up the jemmy. It is the regular thing.'

My efforts to shake this witness's evidence about the gate were all in vain. He swore on cross-examination that it had been locked and forced open. Moreover, the panel bore evident traces of the crowbar.

The police-constable Horton was the next witness. He corroborated Maxwell's evidence in a few words, laying special emphasis on the prisoner's extraordinary violence. His face was still disfigured by a violent blow which he had received during the encounter.

'Will you swear that the prisoner was sober?' I asked.

'As sober as a judge,' answered the witness. This caused a laugh in court at Lord B——'s expense. This gentleman had a very red nose, and enjoyed the reputation of being an ardent votary of the divine bottle. I joined mildly in the general mirth, but bitterly regretted it the moment after, for it seemed greatly to annoy his lordship. He frowned at me in an ominous manner, and, but for his

forced impartiality, I might have feared my cause already lost.

The last witness was Mrs. Wolfe. She was a sweetly pretty woman, and gave her evidence in a straightforward and modest manner. I noticed that she kept her face averted from the prisoner. She was dressed in deep mourning.

'My husband was away from home on the 2nd of last month. I was alone at No. 52 with two maid-servants. We had retired to bed at ten o'clock. At about half-past one I was awakened by a noise at the front gate. Then I heard steps in the garden; I thought for a moment it might be John, my husband, though I did not expect him back. But when I heard the steps at the back of the house, I knew it must be some stranger. I got out of bed and looked out of my window. At first I could see nothing, but presently a man crossed the lawn. He had a bull's-eye lantern in his hand. Then I threw up the sash and screamed for help. It appeared that the man I had seen was a constable, for he answered me. I saw him jump forward and drag another man out from under the laurel-bush; they struggled together for some time. Then the man ran away and the constable after him. We keep no valuables in our house. My late husband had all his plate, except the barest necessaries, at his banker's. Our house has never been attacked before.'

'Have you any questions to ask the lady!' said the judge to me.

'No, my lord,' I answered; for a minute before, the prisoner had sent me a note, saying, 'Don't ask her a word—not a word.'

'Well, then,' said Lord B——, 'you may retire, Mrs. Wolfe. Thank you. Good-morning.'

Lord B—— was always charmingly polite to ladies.

After a few remarks from the Treasury counsel, the case for the prosecution was declared to be closed, and I rose to reply.

I am not going to report my speech. I feel heartily ashamed of it, and of myself. The charming Mrs. Wolfe

was in my head all the time I was speaking, and sadly interfered with my logic. Moreover, I felt inclined rather to espouse her cause against a man who had been wicked enough and inconsiderate enough so rudely to disturb her delightful slumbers ; I almost forgot that he was my client, and that I was paid to defend him. Still I do not think that I omitted to urge anything that could be said on his behalf. I maintained that it was his first offence, and should be looked on as such by the jury, seeing that they had no proof to the contrary. I asked what great crime he had committed after all? It was certainly reprehensible on his part to struggle with the police ; he had been violent, no doubt ; but then, was not self-preservation the first law of nature? As to his having given a false name, it was natural and excusable enough. Everything proved that he was no professional burglar, no member of the dangerous classes. What burglar would break into a house where it was well known that no valuables existed? Might there not rather be some deep intrigue underlying these suspicious circumstances?

At this point I was sharply taken up by his lordship.

This interruption entirely spoiled my peroration, and I sat down, considerably confused and annoyed.

A paper was passed to me by Mr. Spedding. It was another of Backhouse's notes. 'I'm done for!' he wrote, 'so remember your promise.'

Lord B—— then summed up. He spoke for about ten minutes. 'It was a very clear case,' he said, 'and no doubt could exist in the minds of the jury.'

This proved to be the case, for the twelve citizens found my client guilty without leaving the box.

'But we think,' added the foreman, 'as this is obviously the prisoner's first offence, that your lordship might mitigate the punishment usually inflicted in these cases.'

'Thank you,' said his lordship in a tone that implied that *he* knew his business.

He then proceeded to pass sentence. He complimented me, sarcastically, I thought, on my able defence; ad-

monished the prisoner on the subject of various 'might have's'; spoke of the horrors of penal servitude, and his reluctance to consign him to them, and wound up, to the intense satisfaction of Mr. Spedding, Mr. Backhouse, and myself, by passing a sentence of two years' imprisonment with hard labour.

The prisoner clapped his hands on hearing these words, thanked his lordship heartily for his leniency, bowed politely to the jury, and passed out with a significant glance in my direction. I acknowledged his glance with a nod, and went outside to hear Mr. Spedding's congratulations.

'Bravo! Mr. Wilson,' said this gentleman, as we walked down Ludgate Hill together. 'You have done splendidly!'

And—such is human vanity, which only gauges merit by results—I thought so, too, at the time.

It was five o'clock by the time I reached my chambers; and after a hasty glass of wine, I decided to gratify my curiosity as to the contents of Mr. Backhouse's envelope at once.

I took it out of the deed-box, in which I had locked it on the day it had been given to me, and opened it. The envelope contained a sheet of paper, on which was written the following:

'Go to No. 75, Duchess Street, Strand (Mrs. Worthing's Furnished Apartments). Ask for Mr. Field. Mr. Field will naturally be out, and you will be told so. Then say you are Mr. Field's friend, and have come for a book which you lent him. The book is a Shakespeare. Mrs. W—— will tell you to come up and fetch the book yourself. She was told to do so in case anybody called for it in Mr. Field's absence. The Shakespeare is on the bookshelf over the mantelpiece. Take it down, and don't open it until you reach home. Don't answer any questions you may be asked about Mr. Field, or the reason of his absence.'

I confess, I hardy liked the imperative tone of this letter, and had half a mind to consign it at once to the waste-paper basket. But my curiosity triumphed over my resent-

ment and repugnance, and I determined to set out at once for No. 75, Duchess Street, which was within ten minutes' easy walk of my place.

I had been, to the best of my belief, an honourable man all my life. I had never wronged a fellow-creature of a penny, and had always had the strictest reverence for the laws of property. A million pounds might have been confided to me, and, even though starving, I should not have touched one penny of the sum.

And yet—account for it as you can—as I walked down the Strand that afternoon on my strange errand, I felt curiously elated. It seemed to me that I had suddenly acceded to a considerable increase in wealth. I did not reflect that all the benefit I was to derive from this affair was a walk, and that, *per contra*, it would expose me to some annoyance, and possible anxiety. I felt as if the two thousand seven hundred pounds I was going to fetch were to be mine, and I delighted in the anticipation of handling so important a sum. This was all the more strange, that I had a natural repugnance for touching money. I had never understood the delight of misers in the contemplation of their riches. I rarely carried over a few shillings on my person, and made all my payments by cheque. That day, however, I anticipated all the satisfaction that is felt by those ingenuous persons who are for a moment permitted to hold in their hands large sums of money in bank-notes when they are visiting our chief financial establishment. It pleased me to think, that for two years I should enjoy the possession, though not the use, of a sum more considerable than I had held for many years past. I felt suddenly lifted from comparative penury to comparative affluence. I foresaw great enjoyment in the possession of a treasure for two years. I felt inclined to shout out to the passers-by: 'I have three thousand pounds in spare cash! Which of you can say the same?'

A reaction followed this absurd exitement. I began to analyze my thoughts. But self-searching is a hopeless task, and finally I had to attribute my exhilaration to the wine I

had drunk. So I stepped into the Gaiety bar to take a cooling drink, hoping that a little iced soda would bring me to my sober senses.

I ordered a lemon squash, and whilst I was drinking it I overheard the conversation of two fashionably-dressed young men, who were standing by my side. What first attracted my attention was the mention of my name. In answer to some question put to him by his companion, the man nearest to me had replied:

'Oh, Wilson! He's making a most complete fool of himself.'

'How so,' asked the other, 'I always considered him a very decent sort of chap?'

'And so he is. It's all the more pity he should be such an ass. I don't know what his governor allows him, but it can't be much, as old Wilson is only a barrister with a moderate practice—a sort of a thousand a year man, you know. Of late, Bob has been spending at the rate of five times that amount himself, where on earth does he get it from? Why, it was only last night that Rosie showed Millie—my mash, you know—a bracelet he had given her, and Millie says it must have cost at least a hundred pounds. He talks of buying her a brougham, and I don't know what else beside. How's that for an articled clerk? I only hope he mayn't get into trouble. He's certain to do so if he keeps with Rosie, who is—well, you know what she is. It's a thousand pities, if only for his father's sake. They say old Wilson is a very good fellow.'

I was so preoccupied at the time with the business before me, that though I distinctly heard every word of what was said, it was only several hours later that it struck me that those remarks applied to my son and to myself. In fact, at the time—to use a common expression—the words passed in at one ear and out at the other. I remember wondering faintly who the foolish 'Bob' might be, pitying that 'very good fellow' old Wilson, and instituting a comparison between Rosie's and Millie's supposed charms with the beauties of the lady I had but an hour or two ago seen in court;

and then my thoughts reverted to Mr. Field and Duchess Street. So I finished my lemonade quietly, paid for it, and set forth to continue my errand. I was delighted to find on regaining the street that the cooling drink I had just partaken of had effected its purpose. I now took quite a different view of the case. I had no inclination now whatever to address the public, but if I had done so, I should rather have exclaimed: 'I have made a fool of myself, and have promised a convict to take care of a sum of money during his imprisonment. It is probably stolen property; and in any case a very repugnant trust. Will any kind gentleman, who is not so busy a man as I am, take the business off my hands? Would anyone like to take care of £3,000 for two years?'

In spite of these sentiments, however, I went on, and in due time found myself standing before the door of No. 75, Duchess Street. My ring was answered by Mrs. Worthing herself. She was a respectable-looking, tidily-dressed little woman.

'Is Mr. Field in?' I asked.

'No, sir,' answered the landlady; 'and in he hasn't been these two months. I don't know what has come to him; though he did tell me he was agoing to America, as a Society somethink, and paid me three months rent in advance afore he left.'

'I am sorry,' I replied; 'I'm Mr. Field's—hem—friend. I have come about a book I lent him, and which I am anxious to have back. It is important I should have it to-day. I suppose you have no objection to letting me look in his room for it. It's a Shakespeare.'

'Oh, yes, I know,' answered the woman after a pause, and with evident hesitation; 'but—but—— Well, step in, sir, and I'll tell you. I'm a poor woman, you see, sir, and find a living hard to earn. Now it seemed to me a pity that these good rooms should stand vacant just now in the busy season; and though Mr. Field did pay me my rent in advance—and they should have been kep' for him, there's plenty of small profits lost by his absence—on board, candles,

washing, and such-like; and so—and so—— Well, the lady's in his rooms now.'

'What lady?' I asked.

'Well, the lady as I let Mr. Field's rooms to in his absence. She's a customer, and I wanted to oblige her. Not that Mr. Field would mind—I'm sure. He was a real gentleman, and would not mind my obliging a lady, I'm sure.'

'Then I suppose I can't get the book to-day?' I exclaimed with real annoyance. 'It's very provoking. Couldn't you get it for me? It's a Shakespeare, and you'll find it on the bookshelf over the mantelpiece.'

'Oh, you shall certainly have your book,' answered Mrs. Worthing. 'Mr. Field gave me particular instructions on the subject. But as to fetching it, sir, you must really excuse me—I don't know Shakespeare from Adam. I'll run upstairs and ask the lady to let you come to her room and look for it yourself.'

'Yes, do, my good woman,' I said. 'I shall only be a minute.'

'So he paid her three months' rent in advance,' I said to myself, while Mrs. Worthing was upstairs; 'that speaks in his favour. I really begin to believe——'

'Will you kindly step upstairs, sir?' cried Mrs. Worthing, bending over the balustrade.

'The lady is in the parlour,' she continued, as I joined her on the landing. 'She says she will gladly let you. This is the gentleman, ma'am,' ushering me into Mr. Field's sitting-room.

'I am very sorry, indeed, to disturb you, madam,' I said as I entered.

The lady was sitting at the window, with her back turned to me, but I could see that she held a book in her hand.

She looked round as I spoke. I recognised her at once. It was the person I had seen in court, and whom I had so much admired. The recognition, however, was not mutual. Doubtless she had noticed me but little in the trepidation of the witness-box, and, besides, a wig, gown, and professional air disguise a man wonderfully. She was dressed, as I had

seen her last, in deep mourning, but had laid aside her bonnet and veil. I was thus better able to judge of the great beauty of her shapely head and abundant hair. I had found her sweetly pretty before, I found her royally handsome now. It is no easy matter to describe a pretty woman so as to do her justice. I might exhaust the superlatives and yet entirely fail to give a satisfactory or intelligible portrait. A general outline must suffice. She was a woman of middle height and of a supremely well-shaped figure; her complexion was delicate and her features refined; her eyes were large and dark in colour; and her hair, of which she had an unusual wealth, was brunette.

As she turned, I repeated my apology. She nodded her head in acknowledgment and went on reading. I wa somewhat surprised at her silence, and, being anxious to get done with this business, crossed over to the mantelpiece without another word. I saw the bookshelf, and various books upon it. But though I looked carefully, and took down each volume and examined its title, I failed to find the copy of Shakespeare I had come for. I then turned round and glanced about the room to see if it was lying on one of the tables. There was no sign of it anywhere. All at once I noticed that the lady, though apparently reading, had her eyes fixed on me. When she saw that I had detected this, she rose and said:

'Can I assist you, sir? Mrs. Worthing told me you had come for some book.'

'Yes, madam,' I answered, 'a Shakespeare. I am Mr. Field's friend. It is a book I lent him. I can't find it anywhere.'

'I was reading, or trying to read, a book when you came in,' she answered, 'I think it is a Shakespeare. Is this the book you want?' she asked, handing me a volume.

'Yes; thank you, madam,' I replied, taking it from her hand. I was about to retire with the book in my possession when she stopped me, saying:

'So you are Mr. Field's friend, are you?'

Her tone was so strange, that I looked at her before replying. Then I said:

'Yes.'

She smiled slightly, and added:

'Excuse me, sir, but I think I have seen you before, somewhere. Do you know me? Have we ever met?'

'Certainly,' I answered, 'an hour or two ago. You saw me at the Central Criminal Court. I was counsel for the defence in a burglary case.'

'Ah, yes,' she exclaimed, 'I remember you now; you are much changed though. Tell me, please, how the case ended. The man was sentenced, of course?'

She said this with considerable anxiety, as if, though certain of what my answer would be, she dreaded it might not be what she expected. So, at least, I thought. I did not answer her at once, wishing to convince myself whether I only imagined this anxiety on her part, or whether it was real.

'He was sentenced, of course?' she repeated; 'I heard he was certain of ten years' penal servitude.'

'No,' I answered, 'no; he——'

'You don't mean to tell me he has been acquitted,' she cried, turning pale, and glancing hurriedly about the room; 'you don't mean to say that that dreadful man is free?'

She caught up her bonnet, which was lying on the sofa, and seemed about to rush from the room, when I said:

'No, madam, he was sentenced to two years' imprisonment.'

She gave a great sigh of relief and dropped her bonnet Then she flushed up, and cried:

'What a shame. It's shamefully little. Why, what are we coming to, if men who break into one's house to steal, and perhaps to murder, are let off with such ridiculously small punishments? They told me he was certain of ten years, and I'm sure the wretch deserved them. Ugh! if the police hadn't taken him——'

'You see, it was his first offence, madam,' I said, with a smile.

She seemed about to retort impatiently, but she mas-

tered herself. Then she smiled very prettily, and sat down, saying :

'You must be astonished to see me here, after seeing me in Court. How strange that circumstances should bring you just to my lodgings. Is it not?'

There was, I thought, a mild touch of sarcasm in her voice. Did she think I had followed her home?

'Yes,' I said, 'it is strange; but life, I find, is full of curious coincidences. I do not regret this one, though I am very sorry to have disturbed you—for I must compliment you, madam, on your excellent bearing in the witness-box. I have rarely seen a lady so courageous under the ordeal.'

'But then you didn't cross-examine me,' she replied. 'That would have been dreadful.'

Another bit of sarcasm, I thought, as I made for the door, for I felt that I had no right to stay any longer, sorry as I was to break off my *tête-à-tête* with this charming and enigmatical woman.

Just then, however, Mrs. Worthing came in with the tea-tray.

'Won't you stay and have a cup?' said Mrs. Wolfe; 'you must be fatigued.'

It was an extraordinary invitation under the circumstances, and would have surprised me had I not noticed during our conversation that Mrs. Wolfe, though a charming person to look at, had not quite that indefinable tone and manner that distinguishes the born lady from the woman of the people. Such sudden and unnecessary hospitality to a stranger would have astonished me in a lady, in Mrs. Wolfe it did not. But, lady or woman of the people, she looked so pretty as she gave me the invitation, that I accepted it gladly. Mrs. Worthing was despatched for another cup, while I seated myself on the sofa.

'How dreadful you lawyers are!' said my hostess, as she handed me my tea. 'Really, you do make the life of us other mortals hard to bear. Just fancy, sir, it's now nearly seven weeks since my poor husband died, and though his will was as clear and simple as possible, I'm having all sorts

of trouble about it with our solicitor. Continual runnings to and fro. That's why I moved up here from Putney, and shut up the house down there, so as to be near his office. I am in and out of it twenty times the day.'

'I hope that Mr. Wolfe has left you comfortably off, I said. 'There is nothing that can so soften the affliction of widowhood as a comfortable settlement.'

'Oh,' she said, 'as to affliction, I can't say I feel it. Mr. Wolfe was an old man—old enough to be my grandfather—and oh! so cross. But he was a darling all the same. He has left me everything absolutely. I shall be a rich woman when my solicitor stops bothering—a rich woman.'

The way she pronounced these last words, the triumph she expressed, let in another light on her character. And yet she was so pretty, that the most parvenu arrogance would have been excusable in her.

'I am very glad to hear it,' I replied. 'I suppose you have no family?'

'No, thank God. Fancy having a train of little wolves to remind me of the soap-boiling business. I hope to get rid of my name as soon as possible. Tell me, how does one change one's name? Is it legal? How does one do it?'

'There are two legal ways of doing it,' I replied. 'By advertising the change in a certain number of newspapers and a certain number of times, and by a bond called a deed-poll. But your solicitor will be best able to explain this matter to you.'

'Of course,' she continued, as if speaking to herself, 'the simplest way of all would be to get married again as soon as possible. But how and when?'

'About that there should be no difficulty,' I replied gallantly. I really felt as if I could have proposed to her on the spot myself. Young, pretty and, according to her account, rich, she seemed worth consideration.

She looked at me attentively as I spoke. It seemed to me she was studying my appearance. I hardly liked this scrutiny, being conscious of many personal defects. Besides, the idea was too ridiculous.

'Do barristers get to be judges?' she asked.

'Some.'

'And judges are made lords, aren't they?'

'Occasionally. Lord B——, for instance.'

I rose as I made this reply, and, putting my empty cup down on the table, took up my hat, and added:

'But I must really intrude on you no longer, Mrs. Wolfe.'

She tried to stop me, but it was late, and I was determined to go. I thanked her for her hospitality and departed, carrying my book away with me.

As I reached the door and was making my final bow, she said, with a very pretty smile:

'There will always be a cup of tea ready for you if you like to call of an afternoon. It's rather lonely for me here by myself.'

As I crossed the road I saw her standing at the window looking after me.

## CHAPTER III.

### THE TRUST-MONEY.

I WAS so full of my last adventure, and felt so intrigued by and charmed with the lady I had just left, that I forgot all about Mr. Backhouse and his treasure till I reached my chambers. It was half-past seven when I got there, and my clerk had gone. I entered my private room, drew up the blind, and sat down at my table to think over what had happened to me. I cannot exactly analyze what I felt at that time towards Mrs. Wolfe. I was interested in her, and pleased by her, and yet, somehow, I felt that she was a most undesirable acquaintance for me, of all persons, to make. She was decidedly not a lady by birth, and lacked, in a notable degree, both in manner and conversation, the refinement of one. But the beauty of her person had charmed me, and all the more strongly that, in my past busy life, I had been brought but little into contact with female beauty. My late

wife, an admirable woman in many ways, had lacked this qualification. I had first been attracted by her cleverness and by her sympathy with many of my tastes. She had made a most excellent wife and helpmeet. We had lived together in perfect friendship and harmony, and yet I had always experienced in her society a lack of that satisfaction which is found by all men in the contemplation of a beautiful person.

After her death I had avoided society and had lived for my profession and my pictures alone. And yet underlying the tranquillity of my life there had been the thirst for the satisfaction which I had never tasted; suppressed, subdued, it had existed all the time. I might, however, have ended my days in denying its existence, had it not been violently aroused by the sight of this lady. I could not help comparing her with my late wife. Inferior to the mother of my child in every social and mental quality, as she undoubtedly was, her beauty made the comparison favourable to her. I thought of the years and years of delight to the eye of which I had been deprived. I remembered with growing discontent the unpicturesqueness daily inflicted on my vision by the person of my plain and homely wife. I forgot her sense, her order, her elevating conversation, her hundred virtues. I felt, as I went back to my life with her, like a man returning from some art-gallery where he had seen, admired, and envied some picture full of beauty and life and glowing with rich colours, to his home, rich, indeed, in useful furniture, but entirely devoid of what would please his eye. It was with a feeling akin to bitterness that I reflected on the hourly satisfactions I should have experienced in her society if my wife had been as was this woman. I pictured the latter in my wife's place, in the chair by the fireside, at the window as I crossed the road, bending over the cradle of our child, walking in our garden, in the pew at church, in every pose, in short, in which I remembered her whom I had lost, and, unfair and unjust as it was, this substitution dissatisfied me with my past happiness and made me almost feel a contempt for it.

It grew dark as I sat thinking thus, and when I noticed this, I rose and struck a light. It was then that my eyes fell on the volume I had brought away from Duchess Street, and I remembered the curious interest attaching to it.

'I wonder what connection this book can have with Mr. Backhouse's little bit of property,' I cried, as I lighted the gas, and took the book to examine it. 'I hope I shall not find fresh orders written in it, and be sent off on another expedition. Treasure-hunting for the benefit of other people is unprofitable and fatiguing.'

'I had thought,' I continued, as I turned over the leaves, 'that I should find the bank-notes stitched inside the pages. But if that had been so, Mrs. Wolfe would have seen them. What nonsense! It's all a stupid practical joke, and serves me right for being such a fool. I have a mind to throw it into the waste-paper basket.'

I did not do so, however. I sat down at my table and began to examine the book thoroughly. It was a cheap copy of the work, bound in cloth. On the fly-leaf, which I scrutinized, was written: 'Presented to William Field by his best friend and most sincere admirer, William Field.' I could discover no other trace of writing on any of the other pages, though I carefully examined each one of them, grumbling heavily, all the while, at this waste of my time.

After searching in vain for any clue to the mystery, I decided that there was no mystery at all, that either the money had been discovered by some person—possibly Mrs. Wolfe—and had been taken, or, what seemed still more probable, had never been there at all. I tossed the book angrily aside and vowed that this deception (I had almost written 'sell') was a due retribution for my absurd credulity. The business man within me rose and pointed out the 'irregularity' of the proceeding, the irrationality of my expectations. Do burglars hide large sums of money in books? and do middle-aged and sensible barristers look for them there, and expect to find them? And what benefit could this bring to middle-aged and sensible barristers?

Meanwhile it had struck me that the cover of the book, on which my eyes were resting with angry contempt, was of unusual thickness. I picked the volume up and convinced myself that the back cover was at least one sixteenth of an inch thicker than the front cover. I also noticed that the paper pasted over it on the inside, bulged out slightly in the middle.

'Well,' I cried, 'let me be dupe to the last. I'll split this open.'

Suiting the action to the word I inserted the point of my penknife into the top corner of the cover, and pressing it inwards and upwards separated the two layers of cardboard of which the binding was composed. Then tearing them asunder with my fingers I divided it completely in half. As I did so, several white papers fell out on the table. I picked one of them up and spread it out on the table. It was a banknote folded in two—a banknote for £1,000. The other papers proved to be the same. There were in all five banknotes—two of £1,000 one of £500, and two of £100. I examined them carefully, and, as far as I could judge, they were genuine. I confess that I felt very astonished at the sight of them, for I had never quite believed in their existence. At the same time my feelings towards Mr. Backhouse changed completely. I felt a certain amount of respect for him, prisoner though he was. However, I determined that I would first satisfy myself that they were his lawful property before taking care of them on his behalf, and carefully noted down their numbers, with the intention of inquiring on the morrow at the Bank of England if at any time since their issue these notes had been stopped. I then put them carefully away in my cash-box, and locked it up in my safe. After this I left my chambers, dined at a restaurant, and took the train at Waterloo down to Wandsworth, where I lived.

For the first time for many years I passed a completely sleepless night.

The next morning before going up to town I had an interview with Mrs. Hackett, my housekeeper, an old lady who had been in my service since the death of my wife.

She came to tell of a disastrous fire which had taken place during the night at a house in the neighbourhood, and which had destroyed many valuable chattels.

I merely said, 'How dreadful!' and escaped before she could point the moral of this incident. The fact was that my furniture and pictures were not insured, and this want of precaution on my part was an hourly care to my estimable housekeeper. For years she had urged on me the folly of exposing myself to the risk of such a loss as would be entailed by the destruction of my effects and of my gallery, but, whilst admitting the sense of her argument, I had always declined to comply with her suggestion. To tell the truth, I grudged paying the annual premium, which on an insurance of such valuable possessions as I had, would have amounted to no inconsiderable sum. It was, no doubt, careless and unbusinesslike on my part, but I was pinched for money and did not care to spend part of my spare cash in guarding myself against a very problematic risk. We took great precautions in our house against fire, and had all the necessary appliances for combating it in case of an outbreak, and this I considered as much better than insurance, as prevention is better than cure.

The first thing that I did that morning on reaching my chambers was to copy out the numbers of William Backhouse's notes on a piece of paper and to send my clerk round to the Bank of England to inquire whether at any time these notes had been stopped. He returned in about a hour and informed me that they were 'all right.'

I was much relieved in my mind on hearing this, as I had had serious misgivings on the subject.

The rest of the morning I spent in arranging my papers, for it was the eve of the Long Vacation, and this was to be my last visit to my chambers for some time.

At noon my son called on me. It was on seeing him that I first remembered the conversation I had overheard at the Gaiety bar on the previous afternoon and understood to whom it was applied.

This remembrance inspired me with all the more severity

that I saw at once that the motive of his visit was a demand for fresh supplies. He had a guilty, hang-dog look on his face that revealed to me his thoughts. Therefore, before giving him time to speak, I said, with all the severity I could impress on my words.

'Robert, was that Rosie you had in your cab yesterday?'

'Rosie?' he asked, feigning astonishment, and yet looking considerably taken aback.

'Yes,' I repeated, Rosie—the girl you gave the bracelet to. It's no use your denying it, I know all about your disgraceful conduct. Answer me.'

'What am I to answer?' he asked sulkily.

'Was that girl Rosie?'

'Yes.'

'And did you give her a bracelet some days ago?'

'Yes.'

'How did you get it?'

'Oh, papa,' he cried, 'I came here to tell you about that wretched affair. I have been an awful fool, and have got myself into a dreadful scrape. I want you to help me again. You must, or else I do not know what will become of me. I know I have been acting disgracefully, but I promise you——'

'You can't want any more money,' I said, interrupting him. 'I gave you twenty pounds yesterday. What dreadful scrape have you got yourself into? Nothing dishonourable, I hope.'

'I'm afraid so,' he answered, hanging his head.

'I think,' he continued, keeping his eyes fixed on the ground, 'that I had better make a clean breast of it, and I faithfully promise you, papa, that if you will get me out of this mess, I will never again give you any cause to complain of me. Yes, I have been playing the fool with a girl called Rosie, who is a dancer in one of the ballets. I have been very much in love with her, and, for the matter of that, am so still. It's idiotic, I know; but I can't help it. She has cost me a dreadful lot of money, because, you know, I

had to give her presents. Fellows always do so with their girls. I have spent every penny you have given me on her. But that is not all. A week or two ago we were walking in Bond Street together, and in passing a jeweller's shop she saw a diamond bracelet which pleased her very much. She made me ask the price. It cost £150. Of course I told her I couldn't afford such a present, but she insisted on my buying it for her. She said that if I refused to do so she knew plenty of fellows who would only be too glad to give it her. I know that there are plenty who envy me Rosie, and I couldn't bear the thought of losing her friendship. Luckily, the jeweller knew me, for I had bought several things there before, and have brought him several customers, and so he let me have the bracelet, on my promising to pay for it in a week. The week was up yesterday, and I had to go and tell him that I was unable to keep my promise. He kicked up an awful row, and said that if I didn't pay for it in twenty-four hours or return it he would put me into the County Court. He also said something about obtaining goods on false pretences. I was dreadfully frightened, and went off to Rosie's lodgings to try to persuade her to let me have the bracelet back. But, just like my luck, the poor girl had had difficulties with her landlady that morning and had been obliged to pawn it to a private money-lender, who lent her thirty pounds, but won't return the pledge until she pays him sixty. Rosie was very sorry for me when she heard what trouble I had got into, and said that under these circumstances she thought she ought to sacrifice herself to help me. She said that she could get forty pounds together by borrowing money from her friends and by pawning other things, and that if I could find her the other twenty she would go and get the bracelet back. So I came here and got you to give me a cheque for twenty pounds, which I handed over to Rosie, and whilst I went back to my office she went to get the jewellery out of pawn. I met her in the evening, by arrangement, to get it, but fancy! her dressmaker had called on her that afternoon and had rowed her so dreadfully, that the poor girl was forced to pay

her her bill. This swallowed up all the money she had scraped together, and the bracelet is still unredeemed. If I can't get it back to-day I don't know what will happen to me. A clerk came round to our office this morning with an awful letter from the jeweller. I am afraid I told him some lies when I bought the bracelet, that I had a private income, or something, and he threatens criminal proceedings. It's a huge sum to ask you, papa, but if you could let me have the sixty pounds, I——'

'I can do nothing of the sort. I shall not give you another penny. You must bear the consequences of your folly. If you choose to ruin yourself with such women and to be duped by them, it must be your own look-out. I shall most certainly not be punished for your idiocy. Not a penny will I give you. Do you hear?'

'Yes, I hear,' he answered; 'but I can't believe that you will abandon me thus. Sixty pounds is a lot of money, I know, but you can easily spare it, and——'

'Oh,' I cried indignantly, 'I can easily spare it you think? Well, let me tell you that I can do nothing of the sort. I have told you over and over again how limited are my means.'

'Of course they are if you go buying a lot of rubbishy pictures. You have sunk a fortune there. But what am I saying? Don't be angry with me, papa, and do, please, help me.'

'I cannot, and I will not,' I answered.

Then he began to work himself into a rage, and stormed about my room with the gestures and words of a petulant and spoiled child. Now praying, now promising, now threatening, he repeated his request a hundred times. If I refused him, he said, there was nothing left for him but suicide. He even went down on his knees, and clasped my feet. I confess I was greatly touched by the aspect of his distress, but I still saw the utter impossibility of helping him in the way he proposed. At last I bade him calm himself, and asked him to give me the address of the jeweller in question.

'I will go round to him this afternoon,' I said, 'and will see what can be done. I dare say he will consent to wait if I speak to him.'

'But why not give me the money to get the bracelet out of pawn?' he asked. 'It would cost you much less than to pay for it, as I want to return it. You would save ninety pounds.

'I have told you I cannot spare the money. I could not spare ten pounds to-day; and shall be very much pinched indeed for money for many months to come. You don't seem to remember how much I have given you this year. No, the only thing I can do is to speak to this man and to ask him to wait. It is incurring a responsibility which I am very disinclined to bear, but I will do it in the hope that this may be a lesson to you, and that you will mend your ways for good in the future. Come, give me the jeweller's address.'

'I'd rather not, papa. I—I—I have my reasons. Oh, do please give me the money.'

'It's absurd—I cannot, I tell you; I haven't got it. Well, as you refuse to let me help you in the way I propose, you must arrange the matter yourself: I will hear nothing more about it.'

'How can you say you haven't got the money?' he cried indignantly.

'What *do* you mean?' I asked, losing patience.

'Why, look there,' he cried, pointing to my desk, on which lay the notes I had that morning taken out of my cash-box, in order to copy out their numbers. 'There is fifty times what I ask you for.'

'That's not mine,' I cried, gathering the money up hastily and putting it into my pocket-book.

'Whose then?' he sneered incredulously.

'That's no business of yours, sir,' I retorted angrily. 'Here, be off! I am quite tired of being bothered by you. I can't give the money. That's final. Go back to your office at once.'

'Another wretched picture, I suppose,' he muttered, as he

made for the door. 'Well, I hope you mayn't regret what you have done. I had better go and throw myself over Waterloo Bridge, I think.'

'You had better go back to your office, and employ your time to some good, I think,' I said as I closed the door behind him.

I then returned to my work of arranging my papers, and was thus occupied, when Robert returned.

'What *do* you want now?' I cried impatiently.

'I want to know at what time you are going home,' he said.

'Why? Do you want to come with me?'

'Yes,' he answered. 'I am going to try and get back into my regular habits again. I really want to amend. I should like to go down with you like I used to in the old days.'

'Very good, my lad,' I answered; 'I am very glad to hear it. I shall go down by the eleven o'clock train to-night. You can meet me at Waterloo Station at that hour, and we will go down together. And, I say, Bob,' I added, seeing how pale and trembling the boy looked, 'don't be too cut up about what I said to you just now. If you behave yourself, and I see that you really mean to amend, I'll do my best to get you out of your scrape.'

'Thank you, papa,' he said, and went away muttering something which I did not catch, but which was doubtless a further expression of his gratitude.

When I had finished my work at my chambers, and had put everything in order, I went out to lunch, and after lunch I called on Mr. Spedding, with whom I had some accounts to settle. This call occupied me till five, and at five it was my habit to take a cup of tea. Whilst thinking where I should partake of it on that day, I remembered that pretty Mrs. Wolfe of Duchess Street had given me a standing invitation to call on her. 'Why should I not go? I asked myself. It is not quite the thing, doubtless, but what does that matter? It will give me pleasure to see her, and she, she said, would always be delighted to receive

me. Besides, what possible bad consequences can this acquaintance lead to?'

My strong inclination to see the lady again overcame any slight misgivings I felt as to the propriety of my repeating my call at so early a date, and shortly before half-past five I found myself once more outside her house. The door was opened by a servant girl, who told me that Mrs. Wolfe was engaged with a visitor, a gentleman who had called shortly after the lady of the house—Mrs. Worthing—had gone out. I was turning away, when we heard the gentleman come down the stairs. I must confess I was somewhat astonished at his appearance, for I never saw a more common-looking man. He looked most like an East-end coster-monger, and to this effect the fur cap he wore greatly contributed. He was a short, broad-shouldered, hulking man, with greasy locks carefully plastered down over his temples. His face was strongly marked with pimples, and one of his eyes appeared to be in a favourable stage of recovery from the effects of a violent blow. As he passed me he threw his finger up to his cap and said, 'Good-day,' and 'By your leave, governor.' He was the sort of man who looks incomplete unless he has a mongrel terrier following him. I had seen many of his type in the course of my profession, and would have wagered heavy odds that he was not unacquainted with the practice of feloniously entering places where he had no business.

As soon as he had got into the street, I bade the girl run upstairs and see whether Mrs. Wolfe could receive me.

She obeyed, and presently returned to tell me to go to the parlour.

I found Mrs. Wolfe looking a good deal upset, and obviously endeavouring to hide her feelings. She looked pale and seemed very nervous. She received me, however, with a very gracious smile, and shook me warmly by the hand.

'This is very kind of you, Mr. Wilson,' she said, 'I really had not hoped to see you again so soon. It is good of you to remember me.'

'I am sorry to see you looking so poorly,' I answered. 'You have had a visitor just now. I was going away when he came down.'

'Oh! you saw him, did you?' she asked.

'Yes, I saw the gentleman.'

'Gentleman!' she cried, 'that horrid man! He is always pestering me for money. His brother was footman for many years to my late husband, and this fellow presumes on his connection to come begging for alms.'

'The sturdy rascal!' I rejoined. 'Why don't you give him into custody?'

'Oh, if I dared!' she began, then she stammered as if she had made a mistake, and made a clumsy feint to recover it by adding, 'Oh, if I dared ask you a favour, Mr. Wilson.'

'What is it, madam?' I asked.

'Would you take a cup of tea?'

'With the greatest pleasure, madam. But to return to your visitor. You must certainly not let him importune you. Give him into custody next time he calls. You look quite upset.'

'Oh, it isn't that, I have had very bad news to-day—very, very bad news.'

I said nothing, not wishing to appear curious, but endeavoured to convey to my features an expression of sympathetic interest.

'Yes,' she continued, 'downright bad news. I always thought that Wolfe had left me his money absolutely, and to-day I hear that I am to enjoy it only as long as I remain a widow.'

'Which, you being young and pretty and lovable, is not likely to be long,' I said.

'Well, it is hard,' she answered with a smile. 'I don't say that I have any particular wish at present to marry again; it would almost be heartless in me to say so. But it is not pleasant to think that if I *do* meet a man I should like, I can bring him nothing but my person. Besides, one does not like to look forward to losing an income of two thousand a year.'

'But did Mr. Wolfe leave you nothing absolutely?'

'Oh, yes, the house and furniture, the plate, and about three thousand in cash. The rest for life only, and on condition of my not marrying again. It's very hard lines.'

'Well,' I said, 'you must live quietly for some time and try to save. With what you have and several years economy you will possess a very pretty little fortune. But I really don't think, Mrs. Wolfe, that the lucky man who finds favour with you will wish for anything beyond yourself.'

'You make me very nice compliments, I'm sure,' she said. 'People are very greedy of money to-day—I know that I am—but then I suffered poverty for many—— But what am I saying? As if my wretched affairs could interest you.'

And to tell the truth, they no longer did to any considerable extent. I found her much less interesting in her new circumstances than before. This was, no doubt, very despicable on my part, but it is the way of the world and of the worldly.

'By-the-bye,' she continued, changing the subject, 'I want to ask you a favour. That Shakespeare that you took away yesterday, could you lend it to me? I never read his works before. I began reading something yesterday and it interested me so much I should like to go on with it.'

'I can lend you a Shakespeare, certainly,' I answered, 'but not that copy, which, I am sorry to say, I have mislaid.'

'Oh, you must try and find it,' she said anxiously, 'I shouldn't care to have any other copy than that one. It is a way of mine. If I begin an author in one book, I like to continue him in the same book. It doesn't seem the same to me out of another copy. It's like when you take a bite out of a slice of bread-and-butter, you would rather finish that slice than lay it down and begin on a fresh piece. But what are you looking at, Mr. Wilson?'

I had happened to look out of the window as she had been speaking, and had seen standing on the opposite side of the road the man I had met coming out of the house we were

in. He was looking up at the window of the room, and was evidently watching.

'It's the footman's brother,' I said.

She came up to the window and looked out, and, when she had seen what had attracted my attention, she turned pale with anger, and biting her lip muttered something that sounded very much like an oath.

At that moment the man crossed the road and rang the door-bell.

'I can't see him,' she cried, running to the door and opening it. 'Mary!' she shouted to the servant, whose steps were heard in the passage downstairs. 'Don't let that man in. I won't see him. Send him away.'

Then she closed the door and locked it.

We could hear the dialogue that was carried on between the man and the servant girl, and, I confess, I listened to it with considerable interest. But beyond some questions about 'when that lanky bloke upstairs was going to clear out' I heard nothing, for Mrs. Wolfe ran to the piano and began to play a loud march, which completely drowned the conversation. At last the door downstairs was violently slammed to, and a minute after the unfortunate visitor crossed the road again and took up his old position. He had a decidedly disagreeable expression on his most disagreeable face.

I could not help wondering whether this individual might not be a suitor for the lady's hand, who suspected in me a rival, and was determined to keep his eye on me.

'He has gone—God be thanked!' cried the lady, rising from the piano. 'I beg your pardon,' she continued, endeavouring to master her emotion. But when I am upset and annoyed I always find relief in music.'

'I thought,' I said, 'that you played so as to drown the man's voice. It was doubtless considerate on your part. He seems a very vulgar man.'

'He is—he is a brute. I shall take your advice, Mr. Wilson, and give him into custody if he calls again.'

Shortly after this, I took my leave, but not before she had

begged me to call again, and, if possible, to bring her the book I had taken. I promised to do my best to satisfy her wish, and, in any case, to call on her at the first opportunity.

The man was in the street as I left the house. He eyed me with much ill-favour. I returned his stare, wherepon he slunk away down a side-alley. When I had reached the end of the street, however, I looked back and saw him once more ringing at Mrs. Wolfe's door. I waited, and saw the door open and the man enter the house. I remained watching nearly ten minutes, but as he did not come out again, I went away considerably puzzled and intrigued.

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE FIRST BREACH.

After dining at a French restaurant in Regent Street, I spent the rest of that evening at my club in St. James' Square. I had gone there with the intention of having a rubber with some of my friends, but found myself much too preoccupied with my thoughts to play. I accordingly withdrew to a secluded corner of the smoking-room, and there, seated in a comfortable armchair with a good cigar in my mouth and a cup of coffee by my side, gave myself up to a serious reflection on the various incidents of the past few days.

What chiefly occupied my thoughts was the person of Mrs. Wolfe. This pretty widow puzzled me exceedingly. She was evidently the centre of an intrigue, which, though interesting enough, seemed hardly a very respectable one. Whatever doubts I might have had on the subject before, I was now fully convinced that there was some connection or tie between her and my convict. The mysterious circumstances of the burglary, the mutual expressions of interest in each other which both she and William Backhouse had uttered, and the fact of my having found her in the rooms he had

occupied under his *alias* all pointed most strongly to this conclusion.

The more I thought on the subject, the more clearly my reason pointed out to me that it was, under all circumstances, my duty to put an end and at once to the intimacy which had begun to spring up between this lady and myself. I felt that I owed this to myself, to my son, and to my profession. Yet I could not bring myself to a definite decision at once. She pleased me—there it was—she pleased me.

So, finding it more convenient to defer the consideration till another time, I amused myself with my papers and in conversation till a quarter to eleven. I reached Waterloo station almost as the clock struck, and after looking hastily round for my son, of whom I could see no signs, I took my place in the Wandsworth train. I was sorry to have missed him, and rather angry at his having failed in his promise to go down with me. Thinking that he might perhaps arrive at the last minute I leaned out of the carriage window. But he did not appear. Just as the train was beginning to move a number of passengers ran up and jumped into the various carriages, but, as far as I could see, Robert was not amongst them. Of this I convinced myself at Wandsworth when I got out. He was not amongst the passengers.

'Another good resolution gone to pave Sheol,' I muttered, as I made my way out of the station, home.

My house was situated at a short distance from one of the roads which lead to Putney, in a somewhat isolated position. Access was gained to it down a narrow lane, which was almost dark at nights, being lighted only by a gas lamp at its point of departure from the road.

I am not a timid man, yet at times I have felt rather nervous as I went down this lane. In the course of my profession I have been brought very often face to face with garrotters and their works, and often after attending some particularly gruesome case I have been far from feeling that joy which it is said fills the heart of man as he approaches his home. Entering the lane with the dignity of a

member of the bar, I have sometimes in the middle of it thrown dignity to the winds, and have scampered down the lane with all haste till I reached my gate, like a frightened schoolboy.

On this night, however, I was in that cheerful and good-humoured state of mind which a first-class dinner, a cup of good coffee and an excellent cigar do ever procure to the man who has enjoyed them. Doubtless, also, the handsome sum of money which, in bank-notes, was in my pocket contributed to the general feeling of well-being which pervaded my frame. The possession of money, even though it be only trust-money, is ever a comfortable thing. I had got down to the middle of the lane when I heard a step behind me. Before I had time to turn an arm was thrown round my neck and I was dashed violently to the ground. The attack was so sudden that I had no time to defend myself, but under any circumstances I should surely have got the worst of it, for my unseen adversary seemed to be endowed with great strength. Having laid me in the mud, he put his knee on my chest, and grasping me by the throat with one hand, began with the other to rifle my pockets. I had no defence but my tongue, of which I began to make good use. He tightened his grasp on my windpipe, and went nigh to choke me, muttering at the same time, 'If you say a word I'll throttle you.' Even though in such distress, I retained my power of observation and distinctly noticed that the voice was unnatural—that is to say, a feigned one. I had determined to make no resistance, but checking with one hand the pressure on my neck, sought with my other for my pocket-book. It happened providentially, that the inside breast-pocket in my coat was on the left side, instead of on the right side. I succeeded in drawing the portfolio out, and flung it down the lane in the direction of my house. The thief must have noticed my movements, and have guessed what I had done, for, after dealing me a violent blow on the temple with his fist as if to stun me, he jumped to his feet and ran up the lane in the direction where I had thrown my property. I followed him to the

best of my ability, and presently heard him striking matches in search. There was some wind blowing, and his matches did not take fire. When I found myself very near to him I grew afraid and did not dare to advance, for I felt myself no match for this sturdy ruffian, and did not wish for another encounter with him. I was standing, then, in some hesitation as to how I should act, whether I should remain standing or should hurry away to the high road and call for assistance, when a most unexpected occurrence took place. A second person, who had apparently been in hiding in the hedge near which we were standing, rushed out suddenly and fell upon the man who had previously attacked me. I could see but little, but could hear the sound of a brisk struggle interspersed with no very decent language. The second assailant seemed to get the worst of it. I was glad, however, of his interference, for I had been in serious fear of my life. The sound of a heavy fall then struck my ears. The combatants had rolled on to the ground and were continuing their struggle there. Profiting by this circumstance, I darted past them and made for my home, leaving them to settle their dispute between themselves. About twenty yards from my gate I stepped on something soft, and bending down, discovered to my great joy that it was my pocket-book. I picked it up and ran home with it in my hand, nor did I stop till I had reached my study, the door of which I was careful to lock and bolt. My housekeeper, as I had expected, had already gone to bed.

Now, had I been a courageous man, I should have armed myself, and have sallied forth to rescue my deliverer, and to hand my assailant over to justice; but I am not a courageous man, and considered that I had that night incurred sufficient peril. Besides, I had some doubts as to the motives which had prompted the man I have styled my 'deliverer' in his act. It seemed to me not improbable that he was an accomplice of the other malefactor, unless his object in hiding in the hedge had been a personal attack on myself and on my property. Else why had he been in hiding? I felt considerably nervous, knowing what men

were in my vicinity, for might not the victor carry out his evil intentions and pursue me to my home and break into my house. I determined to sit up that night, and having lighted up, and made fast the various rooms that looked on to the front, concealed my money under the drawing-room carpet, and locked myself up in my study with a loaded revolver on the table before me. I then first began to repair the damage which had been done to my attire by my struggle. I was brushing my coat, when I heard the garden gate swing, and the sounds of footsteps on the gravel walk. A minute later I heard a knock at the front door. The knock was a very low one. It was evident that the person at the door was in an undecided state of mind, for before I had had time to get into the passage, I heard him descend the steps and walk away. The minute afterwards, however, he returned, and after listening on the steps a minute or two knocked a second time, more loudly than before.

'Who's there?' I cried, going into the passage with my revolver in my hand.

'It's I,' answered a voice.

'Who's I?'

'Bob. It's I, papa. Let me in!'

It was my son Robert.

If there be a father amongst those who read these words may God in His mercy spare him from suffering such a pang as then shot through my heart.

I opened the door. It was as I had expected. My son was covered with mud, his clothes were torn, his hat was gone, and his face and hands were masses of scratches and bruises.

I burst into tears—I, the man of the world, the man of the most heart-hardening profession. 'Come in,' I said. When he had entered the house I closed the door and walked back to the study. Robert followed me. I laid the pistol down on the table, and stood looking at it, not at him. It was in my mind to kill myself. I felt no anger, only a very great sorrow, an exceeding weariness of life. I could

have died then and had been glad thus to put away my shame, for it was shame in all its bitterness that was at my heart. But suicide had always been held in loathing and contempt by me, whose life had been laid in pleasant ways, and it was my strong prejudice in favour of the sweets of life that stayed my hand.

I turned away from the table and looked at my son, who was standing too, near the door, motionless and dumb. Our eyes met, whereupon he fell to trembling, and hung his head. I said not a word, but feeling tired, sat me down while looking at him. I could not turn my eyes away, for my wonderment was very great; an absorbing curiosity had taken hold of me. Was it well and truly my son, my Robert, who stood there before me. He had, I fancy, prepared some tale to tell me, for once or twice he essayed to speak, but my silence, perhaps, and my eyes surely, killed the lie in his mouth. His blanched lips merely moved, but not a word came forth. The abjectness of his attitude trebled my pain. It was my son, that creature, that was where my shame lay. Oh, the pride of paternity and its joy are sweeter, perhaps, than any of this life's pleasures, but the anguish which one feels at their mortification is bitterer, surely, than any anguish.

We remained thus face to face without speaking for nigh on five minutes. From the wall the portrait of her, my wife and his mother, looked down upon him and me. We were both stained with blood, and there was a pistol on the table between us. Behind me, on the mantelpiece, a clock was ticking in its dull monotony. I was his father, and he was my son.

There is this difference in moral and in physical pain, that the one finds relief in utterance, and the other in silence. I could not have spoken a word then; I suffered and was still. But the suffering was so great that, inactivity being impossible, I rose from my seat, and walked up to the window. I leaned my head against the glass, and looked out into the night. When I turned round again, the room was empty, and my son had gone. I cannot remember how, or when, I

left that room. I have no distinct recollection of what I did, till I found myself lying on my bed. The blood from a wound in my head had stained the bed-clothes. I noticed that. I fell asleep after that, and slept heavily till morning. As soon as I woke, and had recalled the events of that terrible night, I fell to thinking as to what it was expedient I should do. I am a man of a quick decision, nor was it long before I had taken a resolution.

My son should leave the country at once. He should go away—anywhere out of my presence—out of my sight. My tenderness, however, was such for him that I could not bring myself to turn him forth penniless on the world. I should equip him with enough to enable him to have a chance in life. I could not doom him to starvation. I could not abandon him to his own resources.

I looked at my bank-book. There was just five pounds to my credit, about an equal amount in cash of my own in my secretaire, and we were in the first week of the Long Vacation. The boy must have a thousand pounds. I could not send him away for ever with less. John Backhouse was away for two years, and for two years the money was mine. I should have ample time to replace it by then, either from my professional earnings, or by the sale of one or two of my pictures. Yes, but why not sell the pictures now, and get the money thus? Because I did not like to part with them so soon, I was so fond of them; there really was no hurry about that. The only thing about which there was hurry, was that my son should immediately, and for ever, quit my presence. I could no longer suffer the shame I felt at the sight of him. But why give him so large a sum, why not rather make him a yearly allowance of a sufficiency for the necessities of life? Because I wished to have done with him definitely, and for always.

I took one thousand pounds from the store, and taking an envelope inserted the money with a sheet of paper on which I wrote the one word 'Go.' I gave this to the servant, and bade her deliver it to my son. I then locked the money up in a safe place, and shortly afterwards left the house. As I

walked away to the station, I felt like one who has lost his only child, and is returning to his lonely home after the dead one's funeral.

But still further suffering was in store for me. I had not walked down the road a hundred yards, when I met a person whom I recognised to be the junior partner in the firm of solicitors to which I had articled my son. He had a serious expression on his face. He crossed the road as he saw me, and coming up to me, asked me if he might have some conversation with me.

'It is very serious, sir. I have come down from London on purpose to see you. I thought it better than to write.'

I put up my hand feebly as if to ward off fresh suffering, and trembling with apprehension like a guilty man, asked if we could discuss the subject there, or should preferably return to my house. He answered that it was too important a matter to be talked of in so public a place as a road, and begged me to go back with him. As we turned, he took me kindly by the arm, and walked on by my side in silence.

'Now, sir, what is it?' I stammered, when he had taken a seat in my study. 'Bad news, I see. Has Robert——'

'It is, I am sorry to say, about him that I have come to speak,' he answered. At the same time he drew a packet from his pocket.

Mr. Wilson,' he continued, 'I am very sorry indeed to come to you on such an errand. I need not tell you how much both my partner and myself regret the pain we have to inflict upon you. I need hardly say how much we both esteem and respect you——'

'Mr. Hepworth,' I said, 'would you kindly tell me what has happened. Has Robert robbed you?'

'Yes.'

'Of a large sum.'

'Of several large sums.'

'I see what it is,' I said, glancing at the packet in his hand, 'he has committed forgery. These are cheques to which he has forged your names.'

I spoke very quietly, for this was little compared to what

I had learned on the previous night. Mr. Hepworth seemed surprised at my tone.

'Yes, Mr. Wilson, I am sorry to say that that is the case. We received these cheques from the bank yesterday afternoon, and it was not until we went over accounts together down at my house that we discovered that we had been robbed. Your son alone of our clerks had access to our cheque-book; it was part of his duties to draw out drafts, and we used him generally for our business with the bank. Besides, not one of our other clerks——'

'Would do such a thing,' I added, in the calm voice of despair. 'I hope not.'

'You are very cool,' said Mr. Hepworth.

'I am very broken-hearted,' I replied. 'But that is not the question. What do you propose to do? You want me to refund the money, of course.'

'Yes, we are willing to destroy the cheques if you can give us their value. Otherwise we must return them to the bank which is liable. We cannot lose a sum like this. The bank is responsible, and, if we return the cheques as forgeries, must cancel our debit for their value. In that case, of course——'

'The bank would prosecute. What is the amount?'

'Four hundred and sixty-five pounds. All the cheques were dated during the last two months.'

'Have you change for a five-hundred-pound note?' I said, unlocking the drawer of my bureau. 'Let me see—I shall want thirty-five pounds.'

'I think I have,' said Mr. Hepworth, drawing out his pocket-book. 'Twenty, thirty, thirty-five; yes, here it is. There—there's your change, and here are the cheques. By the way—no!' he continued, drawing them back, 'there is another thing—I must stipulate that his articles——'

'Must be cancelled—of course. My copy shall be burnt before your eyes.'

'What a good man of business you are, and how readily you understand things. It is delightful to be able to settle so difficult a matter in such an easy way.'

I applied a match to the bundle of cheques, and threw them blazing into the grate. The other paper followed them, and was soon in ashes.

'There, now that is settled,' I said, locking up my drawer, 'shall we go out? Are you walking my way?'

'Yes, Mr. Wilson,' said the solicitor, rising from his seat. 'How excellently you spoke in *re* Backhouse,' he continued, as we walked down the lane together. 'Why do you start?'

'Did I start?' I asked, well knowing that I had done so at the mention of the convict's name. 'I am very nervous, and am much upset, as you may imagine, at what you have told me. But, please, do not let us refer to that subject again. You were saying—and it was good of you to say so—that I spoke well in the matter of Backhouse.'

'Yes, excellently. Your defeat was a glorious victory. Both my partner and myself admired you greatly, and we think of doing business with you, if you have any time to spare. You know that Mr. Hopkins, our leader, has retired. Would you care to take our share of his former practice?'

'Why not?' I said. 'One never refuses work.'

'If you will, we have a brief ready for you almost at once. It's a serious case.'

'Murder?'

'No, not so serious as that. Embezzlement. You really are very nervous, Mr. Wilson, and are starting again. Yes—embezzlement by a trustee. An abominable robbery, if ever robbery was abominable. But of course we don't, and can't, consider that. The man took advice from us, and is good pay. His case will be tried at the next assizes. He is out on bail now. Shall we send you the brief as soon as it is ready?'

'Embezzlement—eh?' I muttered.

'Yes, of the worst and cruellest kind.'

'Ah!' I said, as we walked on together.

## CHAPTER V.

### MY MISERABLE WEAKNESS.

Mr. Hepworth left me at the station, from which I re-returned home. I was in a most dejected state of mind. I felt I had acted most dishonourably, and had been weak beyond all excuse. I had not held the trust more than forty-eight hours, and had already so betrayed it that I had spent more than half of the man's money for my own purposes. I was exceedingly severe on myself, a severity which afforded me some slight consolation. The last revelation about my son in some degree mitigated the sorrow with which I had cut him adrift. He was so completely worthless, and seemed so irrevocably lost, that I felt some relief to be quit of him for ever. I had also some pleasure in the consideration that I should in the future be able to use my money for myself, nor be exposed to constant and unexpected demands.

The first thing about which I occupied myself when I got home was to write a letter to a firm of art-agents who had more than once done business for me in purchasing pictures on my commission. I informed them that I was desirous of disposing of a number of canvases, a list of which I appended, and whose market-value considerably exceeded the sum requisite to replace the deficiency in Mr. Backhouse's deposit. For I had made up my mind to replace that deficiency without delay. What Mr. Hepworth had told me about the embezzling trustee had smitten my conscience, and though I knew that my conduct could expose me to no such consequences as had come upon him, I was a man of too much honour to do wrong because that could be done with impunity.

My letter having been written and posted, I felt very much easier at heart. In a week, at the latest, Mr. Backhouse's fund would be completed again. The agents had a large connection, and the pictures I had selected were of a ready sale.

I rested that afternoon in my study, endeavouring in quiet to regain the composure which had been so sadly disturbed. My son, I was informed, had left the house in great haste shortly after I had gone out with his employer. He had seen us together, and at the sight of us so earnestly conversing had manifested considerable perturbation. He had taken all his personal belongings away with him. When, now, from the inquiries that I made, I was certain that he had gone for good, I began to regret my severity to him. He was my son, after all, my only son; and now I stood quite alone in the world. I think the tears stood in my eyes as I visited his chamber—the room he had occupied ever since he was a little boy. There, on the doorpost was the mark I had made when on his tenth birthday we had measured him against it. What a poor little fellow he was then. It was here he had been so ill. How anxiously I had paced this very room that night, when all hope seemed lost. It was in yonder corner I fell down on my knees. Would it not have been better if he had died then? But how I had prayed that he might be spared! And what was this that was written in pencil in a large boyish hand on the wall. 'Papa's birthday on Wednesday.' He had given me a present, which I have still.

From thence I rambled listlessly into my picture-gallery, which was built out behind the house, and strolled up and down looking at my possessions, which, usually so attractive, left me then indifferent. It was paint on canvas after all. I had yearnings for other satisfactions at that time, and artificiality had no voice of consolation for my pain, which was a natural pain, a pain of nature.

I fancy that my son was all the dearer to me, because I had found him so bad. It was whilst reflecting on his wickedness and his dishonesty that a considerable uneasiness as to the character of my own recent actions began to take hold of me. More than half of the trust-money had already been squandered, and I could imagine what would be my feelings of shame if William Backhouse, suddenly released, was to stand before me and demand what he

had trusted with such confidence to my honour. On the other hand, I construed my present indifference to my pictures as a result of a firm determination to part with some of them for the purpose of making good the deficit, and finally resolved that, though the victim of unfortunate circumstances, I was by no means such a bad man after all.

But I decided, nevertheless, that I must lay myself under very stringent dicipline with regard to the remainder of the money, and, by certain formalities towards myself, bind myself firmly against touching one penny of it again. This is what I did in pursuance of this decision. I took an envelope, inserted the notes into it, sealed it up with one red and four black seals, and wrote on it with much carefulness of penmanship: 'This envelope contains the property of Mr. William Backhouse. NOT to be opened until July —, 188–' (the probable date of his release). I underlined 'not' twice, and appended my initials to the whole. I then was for putting the envelope back into the secret drawer of my secretaire, but eventually determined that it would be better and safer to keep it on my person, and so put it into my pocket.

When I had done this, I felt considerably more at ease. It is curious how one is impressed with the strength of one's own resolutions, fragile though they may prove, and though we may know them to be. I felt I had just done a very commendable thing, and when my servant announced that Mrs. and Miss Crosthwaite had called, and were awaiting me in the drawing-room, I was sure that this pleasure was a kind of recompense awarded by Providence for my excellent conduct.

For the visit of Miss Crosthwaite gave me sincere pleasure. She was a young lady for whom I had always entertained the highest esteem and admiration. She was the cousin of a Miss Dorothy Crosthwaite, who lived at Keswick, and who had been at one time my best friend. My appreciation of her qualities was all the stronger that I knew that she had no small admiration for me. It is true we had many tastes in common, our love of art being the most pronouncedly so.

And we had always been excellent friends, as a father and daughter might be, and often are. She often used to consult me, and appeared to have firm faith in my judgment. Her mother, Mrs. Crosthwaite, was a nonentity; I have often believed that she considered me in the light of a possible son-in-law, cultivated my acquaintance, and brought me into frequent contact with her daughter in consequence. I cannot say that I ever even took such a possibility into consideration. Since my wife died I had never thought of marrying again—until recently—and never by any means of selecting Lucy Crosthwaite.

She was a pretty girl, somewhat like those that Rossetti essayed to portray, and had the most captivating voice that I have ever heard. I can quite understand a man's falling in love with a woman on hearing her speak; certain timbres of voice have a most complete attraction. It is to this, I think, that the Parisian ladies owe much of their feminine success.

Lucy was charming that afternoon. She seemed very sorry to hear that I had determined to part with some of my pictures, but was glad to hear that her favourite ones were not included in my list. She asked me one or two rather awkward questions as to my reason for disposing of them, and Mrs. Crosthwaite listened with perplexing attention to my answers. I could hardly explain that it was my object to procure money, for that would have shocked daughter and mother equally, though for different reasons. I stated, however, that I was anxious to have the funds necessary for purchasing a remarkable canvas by Boeklin, the German painter, called The Island of the Dead—a picture which since, I believe, has found its way to the Leipzig Museum.

'Mr. Wilson,' said Lucy, after I had made this explanation, 'might I look at them once more before they go? Mamma, do let me go with Mr. Wilson to his gallery.'

Mrs. Crosthwaite acquiesced with singular readiness.

I then escorted Miss Crosthwaite round the gallery. We made pauses before each one that I had selected for sale,

and at her instigation, played a rather childish comedy of leave-taking to them all. At the end I saw that she had tears in her eyes. Suddenly she paused in her walk, and laying her hand on my arm, said: 'Mr. Wilson, you have some other reason for selling these pictures than the one you stated. You are in need of money.'

I started, and looked at her in some confusion.

'Oh yes,' she continued, 'I saw at once that the explanation you gave in the drawing-room was—was not true. I am so very sorry. It is so hard you should have to part with what you so love. It is hard to——' Here she looked up at me with wonderful expression in her eyes for a second's pause, then burst out crying, and blushing all over ran out of the room, leaving me standing in no small amazement. A second later I was thinking about the beauty in Duchess Street, and think I never felt more tenderly towards her or with stronger longing than then.

When I rejoined my visitors in the drawing-room, they both seemed very confused—Miss Crosthwaite especially so. I felt very anxious that they should both go away as soon as possible, as I had determined to go to London again the same evening, and once again take tea with Mrs. Wolfe. I accordingly took the first opportunity of saying good-bye, and did this apparently with so little grace and so much eagerness, that my anxiety that they should be gone was noticed, at least by Lucy. The last thing she asked me as I let them out at the garden-gate was through what agents I proposed to dispose of my pictures. I gave her the names, and watched her retreating down the lane until she and her mother were out of sight, when I ran back into the house and made the hasty arrangements for my departure.

It was six o'clock by the time I reached Duchess Street—an unusual hour for an afternoon call. I had, however, the good fortune to be seen by Mrs. Wolfe as I crossed the road, and she was amiable enough to come down to the door and to let me in.

'I am so delighted to see you!' she cried, shaking my hand warmly; 'and it is good of you to come and see

me so often. Do you know,' she continued, as we walked upstairs, 'I feel dreadfully lonely and dull here, and this legal business is so bothering and long. Why can't they let me have my money and be done with it? Wolfe must have made his will in a very clumsy way. I thought one got one's money at once.'

'You are not in want of money are you?' I asked, as we sat down on the sofa.

'Oh—no,' she answered; 'no—but I am tired of this horrid delay, and want to be free to think of other things. But don't let us talk of me all the time. Now, you?—what is the matter with you?'

'With me?' I asked.

'Yes; you looked awfully glum as you crossed the road. Have you money troubles too?'

I looked at her as she asked this question. I have remembered the expression of her face since.

'Well—no, not exactly,' I answered; 'in a way, certainly, I am bothered about money, but not by having too little. It is rather on the contrary. And people don't seem to approve of this. I was attacked last night as I returned home.'

I fully expected her to echo my word—to cry, 'attacked!'—and to assail me with questions which, if not her sympathy, her curiosity might dictate. She did do both these things, it is true, but not at once or spontaneously. It was like an actress who had forgotten her words, but suddenly recalled them.

'Attacked—Mr. Wilson! Oh! how dreadful!' came after a pause, which much surprised me.

'Well, there was nothing very dreadful about it,' I answered, not without bravado. 'I bowled the fellow over in the neatest fashion. But, I forgot—there were two.'

'Two?' she cried, seeming, for the first time, really interested.

'Yes, two. But they did not seem to be partners in the job, but to be working independently one of the other.'

I then, at her request, repeated the whole story of the

attack and my escape, omitting, of course, all reference either to Backhouse's money or to my son.

It was charmingly pretty, the way in which she expressed her joy at the good fortune of my having escaped unharmed, and her admiration for my bravery then and my quiet composure now. In speaking this praise to me, she put her warm little hand on mine, and looked at me with a troubled expression in her eyes. I felt confused, and could say nothing. I sorely wanted to kiss her.

We sat together thus for a little while in silence. It was she who broke it, with a question that jarred upon my ears, coming so strangely from one who shared, as I thought, the vagueness of my amorous mood.

'What money was it that you carried?'

I stammered out a falsehood. 'I had nothing on me more than what I usually carry. I——'

'Oh,' she said, 'then they would have had their trouble for nothing. But,' she continued, 'I am forgetting that you are my guest. Is this my hospitality? You will take tea with me, will you not?'

'Is it not rather late?' I said, delighted to change the subject. 'Do you take tea at half-past six? It is my fault for calling so late, and I deserve to be punished by having no tea.'

'I waited for you,' she said with an air.

I looked at her, and she looked away. I wondered then if this was coquetry. It seemed, however, all natural.

'Well, then, you must wait no longer,' I cried, gallantly, and crossed the room to the bell. To do this, I had to pass the further window, and as I did so, I noticed that a large red feather fan was propped up against the window-pane —an extraordinary place for such a valuable object. It struck me as curious that I had not noticed it from the street as I came up, for it was so placed as to attract attention immediately from the road.

'Your fan, madam,' I said, making as if I would remove it to some more suitable resting-place.

'Oh, don't trouble,' she said. 'How strange! I had been

looking for it just before you came in. Isn't it funny? One never does see things which are staring one in the face. No, don't remove it. I shall know where to find it now; and I declare, the light coming through those red feathers looks very pretty. I wonder no upholsterer ever thought of making curtains of feathers. They would look jolly, wouldn't they? Now ring the bell, please. They'll know downstairs what it is meant for. What are you looking at so earnestly in the street?'

'Oh, nothing,' I replied; 'I fancied I saw that fellow again —you know, the man that was here yesterday.'

'Oh, that dreadful creature! I really must speak to the police about him. It is too annoying. He is always slouching about here. Where is he?' she continued, rising, and crossing over to the window at my side; 'I don't see him.'

'I merely fancied I saw him, but I may be mistaken. That type of ruffian—— But are you cold?'

'No; cold? Why do you ask?'

'I thought I heard your teeth click or chatter.'

'The idea! You were saying——'

'That that type of ruffian is a very common one. Now, you are looking furiously at me.'

'Oh?'

'Yes, are you angry? Oh, I have not offended you?'

'No; but I will be frank. I don't like that word ruffian. Why ruffian? He is poor and disreputable in appearance, but very wretched; and why speak of a poor fellow in such slighting terms? You gentlemen are too severe on those in rags. I wonder they stand it.'

'You would make a good Radical speaker.'

'God forbid,' she cried, laughing with recovered good-humour, and catching up the red fan. 'Oh! there's the tea. Shall we sit down?'

'I feel quite nervous,' she continued, as she handed me my cup, 'to think about you being attacked last night, and in such a dreadful way. One wonders where the police are, and what good they do. But I must not complain about them, they rendered me a famous service the other day'

—here she shuddered—'did they not? But it's dreadful all the same. By the way, are you armed? Have you a pistol, a revolver, or something?'

'No,' I said, 'I never care to carry such things, as one does have to be so careful, and you never know what may happen if you have such things lying about. Besides, I don't think I should care to fire at a man, even to save my life. It would make me unhappy for the rest of my days, if I was to kill or injure anyone, however bad and wicked that one might be.'

'Yes, you are right,' she cried, 'and I admire you for what you say. I quite understand. It must indeed be dreadful to shed blood. It must be ever crying out against you. Will you take muffin, or cake?'

After tea I rose and took my leave.

'You will come again soon, will you not?' she said, as she let me out at the door. 'I shall be so glad to see you. There, that's right. It's very good of you.'

I walked away from the house, knowing full well that combating a fact was useless. The fact was that I was in love, completely and entirely in love.

I walked away from the house, hardly knowing in what direction I was turning my steps, and so walked on until a crush in the Strand arrested my progress. When I then for the first time looked about me, I found myself standing opposite a gunsmith's shop, in the window of which various arms were displayed for sale. In direct opposition to the laudable opinion I had but a few minutes previously expressed, I walked into this shop and asked to be shown some revolvers. From the assortment laid before me, I made selection of a very powerful arm, which fired a heavy bullet. 'You can kill a man at 300 yards easily with that weapon,' said the young lady at the counter. She had a sweet, childish face, this young lady, and her words came strangely. It is curious how habit changes the nature of us all. After some discussion about the price, I purchased the revolver in question, and also provided myself with a box of cartridges, and before I left the shop the young lady, who

handled the terrible weapon with the same ease and familiarity as if it had been a knitting-needle, had shown me how to load it. I put it loaded into my pocket, and walked out into the street, not without a feeling of melodramatic success.

'Now,' I said, 'if I am attacked in that lane again, I shall at least be able to defend myself.'

I had no occasion whatever to use my weapon that evening, reaching home in perfect safety.

I found awaiting me a telegram and a letter. The telegram was from my son, and came from Preston. It was to inform me he had made up his mind to go to America, and that he was on his way to Liverpool, from which he proposed to sail on the morrow. The letter was from Mrs. Crosthwaite, inviting me to dine with her on the following evening. I answered both these communications, accepting Mrs. Crosthwaite's invitation, and sending a telegram to my son, worded as follows: 'The matter with Hepworth has been settled. Try to do better in the future.' The rest of the evening I spent in boyish, rhapsodical monologues to the lady that I loved, and went to bed in a state of great happiness and of hope in the future.

That night I was disturbed by a very disagreeable nightmare. I but rarely suffered from such an annoyance, but when I did, my visitation was one of more than usual horror. It was very horrible indeed. I dreamed first of Mrs. Wolfe, with whom I was very happy. We were living together in a place that was first garlanded all round with flowers, but which subsequently took the resemblance of a picture-gallery hung with all the beautiful pictures that ever in my life I had seen, admired, or envied the possession of. We seemed to be sitting side by side in the midst of this gallery, and the only distress that I had was that my companion, though she never expressed herself in such a sense, seemed to take no joy whatever in what so pleased me. After awhile, indeed, her indifference grew into stronger dislike, and she insisted I should remove a picture which, painted by Greuze, resembled, in the strangest fashion, Lucy Crosthwaite. We

were quarrelling on this subject, for I told her that that Greuze was what I most cherished in the room. She then rose from the sofa, and touched the walls with a long red feather. Thereupon all the pictures seemed to change, and from being the images of beautiful things pleasing to behold, became the presentments of such horrible deeds as the Newgate Calendar describes—murder, bloodshed, theft, and cruel things. The portrait of Lucy remained, however, in all its serene beauty. Now, after a while she stepped out of the frame, and coming up to me asked me to take her round the gallery and show her all these pictures. Then, for the first time, I noticed a horrible thing, and that was, that in all these pictures of murder and cruel things and vile there was portrayed in pre-eminence of action a man whom I recognised to be myself. Lucy seemed to recognize this too, for, after awhile, she shuddered and left me with a cry of horror and disgust, avoiding me as a cruel and odious thing. I felt indifferent, for I was in love with the other woman, and turned back to rejoin her. But here a fresh terror awaited me. Where she had been, stood now William Backhouse, dressed in a convict's livery, and with a halter round his neck. I started back at seeing him, with fear first, and then because I remembered what he had come to claim. He advanced upon me slowly, the rope dangling down to the ground. I retreated quickly, but with the certainty that I could never escape him. As I reached the open window and was for jumping out, all power and strength left me. At the same time my pursuer came slowly up, and as he passed each picture, the horrid men therein portrayed stepped out of their frames and followed in his paces. This hideous mob was just upon me, when I looked out of the window, and there saw Lucy beckoning to me to come, and with the other hand pointing to the far and open country beyond. My heart filled with hope, for escape was there. At the very moment, however, when, my pursuers being close upon me, I was for leaping out and fleeing away under her guidance, she changed suddenly into that other woman—gigantic now, and blocking my way. I gave a loud cry,

and fell back to awake in mortal terror. It was then daylight, and, as I saw by my watch, full time for me to rise.

I was so distressed by this dream, and felt so nervous all the morning, that, towards noon, I called on a local physician. He told me that I had been overworking myself, and as far as he could judge had been giving myself very great anxiety of late. This, I told him was quite true. He orderd me to dismiss all anxiety—it was easy for him to do that—and at the same time gave me a prescription for some soothing medicine. I felt considerably better for my visit, for his words, though empty, had comforted me.

When I returned home, I found a letter from the art agents to whom I had written. They informed me that they were quite prepared to purchase the pictures themselves, and to pay for them at once. They returned me the list I had drawn out with the prices which they offered written against the name of each picture. In totalling up these sums, I found that I should realize by the sale more than I had expected, and more than was necessary to replace the deficiency in the trust-money. Glancing down the list I noticed that the excess was just the price that the dealers had assigned to one picture, a Corot of great beauty, which was a favourite of Lucy Crosthwaite's. The idea then struck me that it would be a pretty and a gallant thing to do to send this picture, with which I had already previously resigned myself to part, as a present to my friend, and I liked this idea all the more, that all that day, doubtless under the influence of my dream, I had felt singularly tenderly towards the young woman. It never occurred to me to send the present to Mrs. Wolfe, because, for the same reason, no doubt, I felt rather averse to her that day. At last I made up my mind; had the picture taken down, and packed and sent it with a few words of compliment to Mrs. Crosthwaite's house. After that I spent much of the afternoon in admiring, and for the last time, not without sorrow, the beautiful things that were so soon to pass away from me. I had previously written to Messrs. —— to inform them of my

acceptance of their offer, and appointing the day following for the conclusion of the transaction. When my sorrowful leave-taking had been performed, I dressed and set out on foot for Medina, which was the name of Mrs. Crosthwaite's house. It was Lucy herself who let me in, and a very hearty welcome she gave me. My present had simply delighted her. I think I have never seen anybody more pleased or more happy. She took me into her private sitting-room, and showed me where she had hung my Corot, and clapped her hands—tears of joy standing in her eyes—to see it look so well.

'I used not to like this room,' she said, 'for the sun rarely comes into it, and the look-out on the brick walls is chilling and dreary. But now! Oh, Mr. Wilson, look at that warmth and light. I have the sun here now, and what should I look out of the windowf or?' Then she clapped her hands again, and danced about the room in glee.

'I am very pleased, Lucy,' I said, 'to have made you so happy. You see, when we bade farewell to the pictures yesterday, I thought——'

'Oh, Mr. Wilson,' she cried, 'you did not think that. I behaved very foolishly I know, but I did not mean that.'

Just then Mrs. Crosthwaite came in. She came to tell us that dinner was ready, and before I left the room, she had thanked me very warmly for the present I had given to her daughter. I think she laid particular stress on the fact that Lucy's pleasure at my gift was rather because I was the giver than on account of its beauty, and it was then for the first time that it became quite clear to me what were Mrs. Crosthwaite's hopes or plans with reference to her daughter and to myself. For the first time also I began to consider the matter, and as a result, busied myself throughout dinner in instituting comparisons between Lucy and Mrs. Wolfe. I have described both so as to render it unnecessary to put down here the result of this comparison. Lucy seemed in every way a better and more suitable wife, but, on the other hand, I was deeply in love with the widow.

This being so, I was blind to the superiorities of the former, though fully, and, I may add, painfully conscious of their existence.

Mrs. Crosthwaite had apparently determined to bring matters to a crisis. Her many hints and pleasantries, though confusing to me, seemed to light a bright flicker of hope in Lucy's eyes. I felt quite assured now that this charming girl was in love with me. I could see it by her manner towards me, even if her behaviour at her reception of me had not convinced me of it.

It was some time between the pear and the cheese that Mrs. Crosthwaite said: 'It is curious how foolish superstitions are; to-day is the thirteenth, and should, according to the popular idea, be a very unlucky one.'

'Victor Hugo used to consider it so, and Napoleon also.'

'Well, I have always found just the contrary to be the case. I was born on the thirteenth, and was married on the thirteenth. It was on a thirteenth also that my poor husband—— But what am I saying? It has, with that exception, been a very fortunate day. To-day, for instance, there's Lucy made as happy as a queen, and provided for for life.'

I looked at her in some astonishment, wondering how the gift of a Corot could provide for her daughter.

'Yes. We heard this morning from Mr. Huyshe's solicitors. I told you about Uncle Huyshe and his death. He has left Lucy a dowery of £10,000.'

'My congratulations, Miss Lucy.'

'Oh! She did not seem to care. She was laughing and crying over your picture.'

'You can get many pictures with that money.'

'That's what I told her. But I think—— Well, Lucy, shall we go to the drawing-room?'

I much admired Lucy as she walked before me to the drawing-room, and felt that the man who married her would be a very fortunate person. I do not know how far this feeling was influenced by what her mother told me, though

doubtless it had something to do with it. I had mentally gone through my comparisons again, after I had heard of her *apport*, but still decided that, as far as I was concerned, the other was the woman I should choose.

## CHAPTER VI.

### PEARLS BEFORE SWINE.

We had not been sitting in the drawing-room above ten minutes, when Mrs. Crosthwaite rose, and saying something about getting her work-box, retired from the room. Lucy was sitting at the piano, and I was near her on a low stool. When I had closed the door, which I had opened to let Mrs. Crosthwaite out, I returned to my seat. Lucy had been playing till then, but had ceased when her mother rose, and was sitting now, nervously turning over the leaves of the music before her.

'Will you not continue?' I said. 'You promised me a song, and I claim your promise.'

'Readily,' she answered, looking up at me. 'What shall it be? An Italian song—a Heine—or this?'

'What is this? Oh, "Some Day." Well, yes, I like that very much. I suppose I shall shock your refined musical taste by such a confession; but I do like that style of song. I never did appreciate classical music, and always preferred——'

'Music that speaks to the heart. The other speaks to the head. I cannot blame your choice.'

She then began to sing. I was thinking of the woman I loved, as the sentimental words rang in my ears. Of a sudden Lucy broke down, and covering her face with her hands, began to sob.

I felt annoyed, and though I did all I could to comfort her—a difficult matter—there was less sympathy with her in my attempt to console than a desire to put a stop to a ridiculous scene. Her distress, however, seemed so sincere, and

lasted so long a time, that I was forced to ask her the reason of her tears.

In answer to my question, she rose up and looked me full in the face, and then, in the most maidenly and most natural way possible, she said to me: 'Mr. Wilson—I want you to kiss me!'

It was very perplexing; but I saw nothing else that could be done but to comply with her request. I drew her towards me, and, avoiding the sweet, fresh lips that she held up to me, kissed her in fatherly affection on the forehead.

When I had done this she tore herself away from me, and blushing scarlet, said:

'I know you will despise me for this. I know it is improper and unmaidenly. But how can I help it? I do love you so much, and I want you to know it. Do you know, the only thing that I thought of when I heard this morning of my good fortune was, that it would be very useful to buy back all those pictures which you are forced to sell. I suppose no girl ever behaved before as I have done to-night; but I cannot flirt and coquette and play the silly comedy that it is the rôle of women to play. I have always thought that the right thing for a woman who loves a man to do is to tell him so candidly and with the same frankness as she would expect from a man who loved her. Perhaps, if I had been a very young girl, or if I had not known you as well as I do, I should not have dared to do what I have done. I tell you now, and for the second time, that I love you. I have loved you for a long time, and I know from my heart and my nature that it will be so. I want you—I cannot tell you how much—to feel the same towards me. I want you to marry me; and if you do, you will have a wife devoted to you in soul and body. This will surprise you, I know, but it had to be done. I wanted to say it yesterday—a month ago. You know it now.'

Here she paused for breath. I began some banality with 'My dear Lucy.!' when she interrupted me, continuing:

'You are, of course, not prepared. It is a curious offer, this, of a woman to a man. It would shock people, perhaps, if they heard of it. But I did not care for that. Anything was better than to go on pining away, thinking that you might never know it. I do not want you to answer me now. I have no hope that you love me. All I want is for you to know that I do love you, and that if ever you want a wife who could make you happy, as I know and feel I could, that I am here. And I would wait for years, and feel towards you as I do to-day. You may want a wife some day. I shall be always ready for you, if you care to take me.'

I had listened very quietly, and with a natural feeling of pleasure. One's vanity is ever greedy, and what a feast for mine had been spread! I had also greatly admired her as she spoke. Her strange words had come as naturally as possible, and jarred not in the least any prejudice of etiquette, so noble, frank, and straightforward had she looked whilst she delivered them.

Meanwhile, I felt it necessary to make some answer, though at the moment it had been in my mind to kiss her once more and then to go away. But I reflected that if I did so I should leave her in doubt as to what effect her words had produced, and this I was for many reasons unwilling to do. I considered my words for a minute, and then I said:

'I am not surprised at all, dear Lucy. I have known this some time. Do you think your beautiful eyes were as silent as your tongue? And I do not like to hear you say you fear I may be shocked. It is I who ought to ask your pardon for having let you speak first. I am comparatively an old man, Lucy, and you are a young woman, and if I ever thought of changing my position I should not do you the injustice of asking you to share my life. You have the future. I have only the past. Such do not unite well. Then, again, I am a poor man. I know that that is a matter of indifference to you; but it is another reason against the possibility of what you propose. I am very

sorry to have made you unhappy. I know that this feeling rose spontaneously; but doubtless I am to blame.'

I paused here, not well knowing how to continue. My most difficult speech at the bar had never given me such trouble. It was a matter of greatest anxiety to argue to a woman that she was wrong and ill-advised in loving me. I had to steer clear between hurting her feelings on the one hand, and on the other of compromising myself by holding out hope. The very difficulty of my position will be felt when a certain foppishness, which by no means was in me, appears in these words. She then spoke again.

'I did not want you to answer me now. I am not hurt or surprised at what you say. I think that a woman who usurps the man's privilege of offering love, must also be prepared to suffer the man's mortification when that love is refused. Not that I consider that you have refused. I said, that if you ever came to love me or, without loving me, want me for your wife, that I shall always be willing and waiting for you.'

Here she put out her hands to me, as though surrendering herself. I bowed, and left the room.

A few minutes later I was on my way home.

## CHAPTER VII.

### RUINED!

I WAS in no mood to go to bed that night when I returned home, so I lit the lamp in my study and essayed to read. I was naturally much disturbed by what had occurred, and found it a very hard task indeed to follow my book. It must have been past midnight when I sat down, and fully one o'clock when, finding that all attempts to concentrate my attention on what I was reading were in vain, I put away my book. I felt singularly restless that night, and, candle in hand, walked all over the house, under pretence of seeing that Mrs. Hackett had made all safe, but in reality to

find an outlet for my feverish energy. My house was in good care under Mrs. Hackett, and was as safely barred and bolted as if it contained untold treasures.

At about a quarter past one I found myself in my son's room, full now of melancholy thoughts, and disposed to call him back and to forgive him his trespasses, for the sake of his company, and lest on some future occasion I should find myself as lonely as I was then. After that, I went back to my study and looked at my wife's portrait, and thought of my unfaithfulness to her, remembered her as a bride, and again as a young mother, and felt sorry that I had loved her so little. Poor girl! I then tried to read again, but finding that drowsiness had at last come upon me, I took my book up to my bedroom. When I got there I found that my candle had burned down so low that there was not enough left to last me long, and having no other at hand descended again to the study to fetch the lamp with which I had been reading. Whilst I was lighting it, I remembered the revolver that I had locked up in a drawer in my secretaire, and thinking that it would be better to have it in my bedroom, took it up with me too.

I found it difficult to sleep, and reading in bed fatigued my eyes without composing me. I therefore rose again, and, lamp in hand, walked through into the gallery which opened on to my bedroom, and looked once more at my treasures; finally back to bed, and after much restless tossing to and fro, to sleep, with the lamp still burning.

It was an hour later by my watch when I woke. I was surprised to discover, when I had sufficiently collected my thoughts to look at the time, that I was sitting up in bed and was holding my revolver in my hand. There was nothing in the room, apart from the lighted lamp, to explain my sudden awakening, and, though I listened carefully, I could hear no noise without, beyond the wind in the trees. Just, however, as I was laying down my revolver and was going to sleep again, I heard the window of the gallery open, and, a second later, the sound of a man entering the room; then whispering, as though he was speaking to some-

one without. I am not a coward, but I felt very frightened then, and whilst I was gently drawing on my coat, my thoughts were of the fate of my poor brother Richard, whose portrait on the wall seemed to look down on me in anxious fear. I fancy it must have been the light of my lamp, seen doubtless under the door, that delayed the progress of the thieves, for, though I waited fully two minutes—my heart beating wildly all the while—they did not stir. At last I made up my mind that it was the best thing to begin the attack myself, and, taking the lamp in one hand, and my revolver in the other, advanced slowly towards the door which separated me from my nightly visitor. It was a terrible moment as I stood with my hand on that door, in the silence of the night, for I did not know what lay behind it—death or safety. Were these fellows in waiting behind, and would they spring upon me as soon as I opened it? I thought for a moment of turning the key, and retreating through the bedroom, to awake my people and attract the attention of the police. My hand, moist with perspiration, glided over the polished handle and fell to my side. I could hear the monotonous tick of the clock on the mantelpiece, and nothing else. I regretted the absence of my son, he could have stood by me then; and, again, if in this encounter I was to die, I should never see him more, and should die in anger with him, and he would never know that I loved him in spite of all, and had forgiven his follies. Then I thought of Backhouse, and of what he would think of me if he found that I had been killed and that his money was lost. I could hear the stealthy steps of someone advancing in the next room. Then the idea flashed through my mind that these men had come to steal my pictures, and that gave me the courage I had hitherto lacked. I opened the door, caught up my revolver and advanced, lamp in hand, into the gallery. The draught through the open window made my light so flicker that, for a moment or two, I could not see anything, and I advanced blindly, not knowing whither.

'Who's there?' I cried, pointing vaguely with my revolver in the direction of the window.

By this time I was out of the draught, and my lamp was burning brightly. I could see all the room, and there, within a few yards of me, crouching by the wall, a man. The window was open, and against its outer ledge, I could see the two poles of a ladder.

'Who are you?' I cried, pointing my revolver at the man. 'What are you doing there? Speak, or I fire.' At the same time I cocked my pistol.

The next second I felt a violent pain in my shins, and was nearly thrown to the ground. The man had hurled a jemmy at me, and followed up his attack by rushing at me with a formidable bludgeon or life-preserver, I could not distinguish which, raised in the air. By the time I had recovered from the shock of the blow he was close upon me. I was unarmed, for the sudden pain had caused me to start, and I had dropped my pistol. As he rushed up at me, instinctively no doubt, I thrust the lamp violently into his face. There was a struggle, a howl of pain as his fingers were burnt on the heated chimney, a blow at me with the thing he carried, and then the lamp, smashed in my hand, exploded, and the burning oil ran all over the man and on the floor, spreading in every direction like veritable wild-fire. The floor was now one blaze, and with the yells of a demon in hell, the man, maddened with pain, ran about, a blazing mass, seeking to escape. I had been quite unharmed by the explosion of the lamp, and none of the burning oil had come upon me; but I was so horrified at the sight of his burning figure running to and fro, now dashing himself against the wall, now rolling over and over on the floor, yelling in the most hideous and heartrending fashion, that it was some instants before I saw my danger or could decide what to do. The floor was laid here with rugs, and there with straw-matting, and these were ready fuel under the burning oil. When I grew sufficiently composed to know how to act the whole place was in flames, and it was with the greatest difficulty that, leaving man, gallery and house to their fates, I was able to rush through the fire and flames to the window and to escape down the ladder into the garden. I had barely

reached the ground, when I heard the crash of glass, and saw what looked like a ball of fire break through the window, and come down on the gravel walk with a thud that turned me sick. The man, maddened with fear and pain, had flung himself through the glass. He lay there, his head bent under him, with his neck broken, a smouldering mass. But I had other things to think of, for the fresh air had recalled my reason, and I saw what was to be done. I could hear by the screams of the women and the sight of lights in the various rooms that the household was awake, and was therefore relieved of the duty of looking to their safety. It did not strike me at first that the house was in danger of fire, the first danger, that of robbery and murder, having occupied my thoughts. But it did come to me that my gallery was blazing, and in a very short time, unless something was done, would be entirely destroyed. I went nearly mad with anguish, and forgetting all reason rushed at the ladder, with a vague purpose of re-entering that furnace to save what I could of my treasures. I had not, however, climbed three rounds, when I was seized roughly by the collar of my coat, and struck on the head from behind; then I was dragged to the ground, almost unconscious.

'Let me go!' I cried, struggling violently with my assailant; 'my pictures are burning! oh, let me go!'

The man, who had got me by the throat and was kneeling on my chest, muttered a fearful curse between his teeth and attempted to stun me by knocking my head against the ground. The first dawn of morning was in the sky, and, in spite of my confusion and the terrible position I was in—I never expected to escape alive—I seemed in its dim light to recognise the man, vaguely only, and without being able to recall when or where I had seen him. Within two yards of us lay the still smoking corpse of my aggressor's confederate, while overhead the flames were beginning to burst out on all sides.

The wretch's brutality was beginning to take effect, and I was feeling that if I remained in his hand a minute longer, consciousness, if not life, would leave me, and was

attempting a final struggle, when he relinquished me as suddenly as he had seized upon me. Then I saw the flash of a bull's-eye lantern, and then, in quick succession, heard three shots from a revolver fired. Looking up, I saw that a policeman had come to my rescue, and that the burglar was retreating, covering himself with his fire. Another shot, evidently intended for me, for the bullet buried itself in the lawn within a yard of my head, and the man was out of sight. The policeman, evidently afraid to follow, preferred to attend to me, and it was whilst he was endeavouring to help me to my feet that I fainted in his arms.

When I came to myself again, I was in the inspector's room at the neighbouring police-station; Mrs. Hackett and the servants were there too, lamenting loudly. The very first words I heard when I had intelligence of anything were being spoken by my weeping housekeeper, and these were: 'And nothing was insured!' This practical reflection was as good a reviver as a douche of cold water, and I sprang to my feet ready to know all, although my head was aching as if I was going out of my mind. It was a minute or two, though, before I quite realised my position; and when I did, I was surprised to find myself dressed only in my coat and nightdress, over which one of the constables, I presume, had thrown a patrol-coat. My head was bandaged, ached in front, and smarted dreadfully behind. I afterwards learned that I had received a serious wound on the back of my head, where I had been struck while attempting to mount the ladder.

It must have been the weakness caused by loss of blood, and that indifference to other woes which is the one consoling factor in physical pain, which enabled me to listen calmly and with very little emotion to the various accounts of the disaster which were given by those present. I was pleased to hear, in answer to my first question, that no lives were lost—very pleased indeed, for I kept repeating: 'Well,' that's a good thing,' in a way that made Mrs. Hackett whisper to one of the maids: 'The trouble has turned his head.'

My next question was: 'What's happened, after all?'

'As bad as can be, sir,' said the inspector. 'The whole house is well-nigh gutted, though the firemen worked hard and bravely. Some things have been saved. Mrs. Hackett, there, was brave as a lion, and rescued the plate and some papers of yours. There's also a heap of things on the lawn. But, generally speaking, everything is destroyed. Fully insured, of course.'

'Nothing,' I answered.

Mrs. Hackett muttered something, but was too loyal to triumph over me then.

'Ah,' said the inspector, 'then it's a bad job.'

I then for the first time noticed that it was broad daylight. 'Why, what time is it?' I asked.

The constable looked at his watch. 'Half-past seven, sir,' he said.

The girls were crying in one corner. 'Hadn't these girls better go home?' I said, speaking to the housekeeeper.

'Home?' she answered.

'Ah, of course. I forgot. So everything's destroyed?'

'Yes,' said Mrs. Hackett.

'What's to be done?' I said.

'You should sit down, in the first place,' said she, 'or you will be fainting again. We must stay here for awhile. Oh, there they are!'

I looked up and saw that Lucy and Mrs. Crosthwaite had entered the room.

'We have just heard of this dreadful thing,' cried Mrs. Crosthwaite. 'Your housekeeper sent a man round to our house half an hour ago, and we came at once to see if we can be of any use. Remember, we are neighbours and old friends, and that we are ready to help in any way.'

I was watching Lucy whilst her mother spoke. She had not shown the least confusion when our eyes had met; a frank, loyal affection to me beamed in hers. She had at once busied herself in attending to the maidservants, who were crying bitterly, comforting them as best she could.

'You are too good,' I said. 'But I hardly like to tres-

pass. Mrs. Hackett will find us lodgings until something can be done. There are plenty of rooms to be had in Wandsworth. I shall send them all to their homes in the afternoon.'

'But look at their dresses,' said Mrs. Crosthwaite. I looked, and for the first time noticed that they were all dressed in a way which was not much more elaborate than my own toilette. Mrs. Hackett, on the other hand, was as prim and neat in her creaseless black silk dress and bonnet as if she had been going out to church when the catastrophe overtook our home. She wore her gloves, and carried a small bag and umbrella. I could not help smiling as I noted these details. I afterwards learned that this methodical and provident person had lost nothing by the fire, and that she had had absolutely nothing belonging to her in my house, but kept her things, down to her wardrobe and linen, at a room which she had hired in the neighbourhood. As she explained to me, she would expose herself to no risk in a house which was not insured. I have often wondered how she found time, not to speak of presence of mind, to make so orderly a toilette with the house blazing under her. But the British matron . . .!

'No,' continued Mrs. Crosthwaite, 'you must do nothing of the sort. You must all get into cabs and come round to my house, which is large enough for you all. I dare say we shall be able to fit these girls out in something like a respectable manner, and get them off to their homes in the afternoon. It will also give you and Mrs. Hackett time to consider what is to be done. I can furnish you with clothes; I have all poor Charlie's wardrobe at home, and you can have his room.'

I cannot say that at that time I appreciated at its full value the kindness and the practicability of this offer. I think I laughed, in rather a foolish way, and said: 'Poor Charlie! Poor, poor Charlie!'

Mrs. Hackett then broke in: 'That's just the thing,' she said. 'It's very good of you, madam, and shall be done at once. The sooner the better. Perhaps one of these

men would be good enough to fetch us a couple of cabs, three four-wheelers.'

'I presume you are not well enough to make your statement, now, sir?' said the inspector to me. 'This is a very serious matter, as the fire seems to have been preceded by a burglary, and a dead body was found near where the constable rescued you from the man who was murdering you. It will all have to be reported in full, and, as it is so very grave an affair, I should like to have all the details down in black and white.'

I told the man all I knew, but purposely avoided—I do not well know why—saying anything about my supposed recognition of one of the burglars. He took all this down, and asked me to sign my statement, which I did just before the cabs drove up.

Mrs. Hackett put us all into our places—the ladies in the first, me into the second, and herself and the weeping servant-girls into the third; and, thus arranged, our melancholy procession drove off, escorted by a large crowd of curious idlers, who had been standing for the last hour, after the fire had ceased to interest, round the station-house door. I was completely exhausted by the time we reached Medina, and, leaving the ladies to discuss what things they might, was shown to the bedroom, and, throwing myself on the bed, became unconscious again.

I slept till noon, when I was awakened by Mrs. Hackett knocking loudly at my door. I gave her audience in a little parlour adjoining my bedroom. She had come to tell me that something had to be done with reference to the servants, who were anxious to get home, being ill with terror and fatigue.

'Mrs. Crosthwaite,' she said, 'has fitted them out decently with clothes, and all that remains——'

'Is, I suppose, to pay them their wages,' I said.

'Exactly,' said Mrs. Hackett. 'And I think, Mr. Wilson, that I need hardly point out to you——'

'That a month's wages in lieu of a month's notice is their due. Quite right.'

I thought that that closed the discussion, and was moving off to go to bed again, when Mrs. Hackett coughed.

'Well?' I asked, turning round.

'It is, that you are forgetting a slight formality.'

'Which?'

'The cash.'

'What cash? Oh! ah—yes. But, by the way, I don't know whether I have any cash.'

Mrs. Hackett looked very frigid, and sat drumming the table with her fingers, while I fumbled about in my various pockets.

Then, remembering suddenly, I clapped my hand to my heart, as if I had been stung there.

Yes—it was safely there in my breastpocket, the portfolio and its precious contents.

I took out the sealed envelope with trembling fingers, tore it open, and emptying its contents into my left hand, walked up to the window and counted the notes. They were exactly as I had left them.

I took a fifty-pound note and handed it to my housekeeper.

'Will you kindly pay these people, and, by the way, ask each the approximate value of what she has lost, and give her the amount. For I suppose nothing is saved.'

'No,' said Mrs. Hackett, in a tone which decidedly sounded one of triumph, 'all is burnt! Burnt down to the ground.'

'I feared so,' I said. 'Well, then pay these girls, and give them a liberal allowance for their journeys. If they like to come and say good-bye——'

'In that costume, Mr. Wilson?'

'Well, perhaps you are right. Say good-bye to them for me. You have their addresses, of course, in case their evidence is wanted. And that is all, I think.'

'Mr. Wilson, shall I take my salary out of this?' said Mrs. Hackett, waving the note in the air as she halted by the door.

'What, are you going to desert me?' I cried.

'You are not likely to want a housekeeper much longer, Mr. Wilson,' she said, 'seeing that you have no house.'

I laughed foolishly. 'You are quite right, Mrs. Hackett. Yes, you had better take your money too.'

'I will send you the change and the receipts by the maid, sir. Good-bye, Mr. Wilson. It is a thousand pities you did not insure.'

'Nobody knows that better than I do, Mrs. Hackett,' I said sorrowfully.

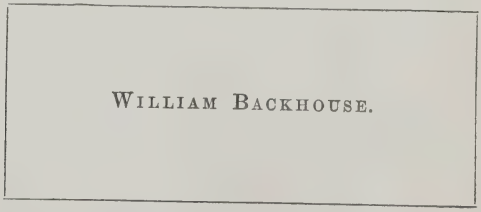
But though I spoke sorrowfully, I was not thinking of the enormous and ruinous disaster that had overtaken me. I was thinking, and with a considerable feeling of shame, of with what perfect calm and *sans gêne* I had just then been distributing William Backhouse's money. I was also thinking that what remained of it was all that stood between me and present starvation. I was without a home, without clothes even—poorer than any beggar in the street; but I had that money in my pocket, and I meant to use it. Yes, I meant to use it, but none the less felt heartily ashamed of my determination.

When Mrs. Hackett had taken her departure, I was preparing to return to bed, for I was completely broken down with fatigue, but was stopped at the door by one of Mrs. Crosthwaite's servants, who came to tell me that a gentleman was waiting downstairs, who was very anxious to see me.

'He said it was very important, sir,' she explained. 'But here is his card.'

I took it from her, and turned cold all over.

Yes, there, clearly enough, it was:




'But,' I stammered, looking round the room as if for an issue of escape, 'I—I—I don't know this gentleman. I

cannot receive him. Look at the state I am in. How can he disturb me?'

I tottered back to the sofa, and sank down upon it, completely annihilated.

William Backhouse!

Had the day of reckoning already come? What could I do? How could I explain? Above all, how could I let this money go out of my hands now, in the position I was in?

Why was I so weak that I could certainly neither defend my honour nor the money. I should have to give up the money, and confess myself a thief. Confess myself a thief to this convict.

I had thought him to be in safe keeping, in gaol for another eighteen months, the time to turn round in, and to make all things good, and here he was within eighteen seconds' walk of me.

William Backhouse!

Then everything was against me. Who had said that retribution was leaden-footed?

I heard steps in the passage, a slow, steady walk.

'Oh,' said the girl, looking round, 'it's Mr. Backhouse himself. Shall I show him in?'

I had no force to answer, I could only put up my hands as if to ward off a blow. The steps came nearer and nearer, and finally stopped outside the door.

'The gentleman is here, sir,' said the girl. 'Mrs. Crosthwaite, it appears, told him to come up. Can you receive him?'

I hesitated in great anguish, and before I had time to answer, my visitor was in the room.

I bowed my head as he entered, as I have seen prisoners do in the Old Bailey when sentence is being passed upon them, and covered my face with my hands, not daring to look up.

I could hear my so-unbidden guest shuffling, as it were, nervously with his feet. Once or twice he coughed as if to attract my attention; but I would not look up, feeling,

though, all the while, that if ever foolish, ostrich-like man there was, I was that man. At last he spoke :

'Is it to Mr. Wilson I have the honour of speaking?'

It was a squeaky, nervous voice, not *his* voice at all.

I looked up, greatly relieved : it was not my William Backhouse at all, but a natty little man, slightly bald, wearing blue spectacles, and apparently far worse at his ease than I had been.

'I am Mr. Backhouse of *The Evening Gazette*. I have been sent down from London to——'

But here I interrupted him, bursting out into a roar of laughter. It was foolish—rude—all you like—but I could *not* help it.

The little journalist was considerably taken aback, both mentally and physically. I mean to say that he recoiled several paces. It was evident from his looks that he thought that my great disaster had turned my brain.

'Oh, I beg your pardon!' I cried, rising. 'I am rather upset. You will understand. Pray be seated, Mr. Backhouse ; I see what you have come about—all details, eh? Well, I am not in a particularly talkative mood, and a better moment for interviewing me might have been chosen. Look at the costume I am in! But I admire the enterprise of your journal, and will talk to you. You can take notes if you like.'

The little man, completely reassured, brightened up, and, drawing his chair up to mine, note-book in hand, listened to my doleful story. He insisted on all details, and departed in high glee, after informing me I had made his fortune, and that his report would be printed with five headlines. When I thought I had got rid of him, he returned and asked me for my photograph. I told him I had none, as he might easily understand, and was for again giving him his *congé* when he whipped out a little camera from a bag he was carrying, and insisted on taking it then and there. I could not help but comply, though, by this time, considerably bored. He told me a block would appear in a special

edition, and that the ruins of my house, and a photograph of the deceased burglar, would also appear.

By the time he left me I was thoroughly awakened, and feeling hungry, abandoned my idea of going to bed again, but, dressing in some of the defunct Mr. Crosthwaite's clothes, descended to lunch. I found Mrs. Crosthwaite and Lucy anxiously waiting to see me.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### INCOHERENT.

I CAN never want to see a more kindly expression of sympathy on the face of anyone, than was on Lucy's face as I entered the dining-room. She looked so pretty, so sweet, and so thoroughly good that I could have kissed her on the spot.

Mrs. Crosthwaite also looked amiable, but very anxious.

'Your poor pictures!' said Lucy, putting out her hand.

'Ah, indeed!' I answered, helping myself.

Mrs. Crosthwaite was then taken sorrowful at the sight of Charles's clothes, and cried dismally.

Lucy kept looking at me with large eyes full of pity. I, for my part, thought of nothing but of eating; I was terribly hungry.

I think that for the first time in my life, I took too much to drink during that meal. What did I care? I had had enough worry, and meant to enjoy myself in the future. Mrs. Crosthwaite's claret was excellent.

At the celery, Mrs. Crosthwaite asked me what I intended to do. I laughed at first, and then I said I did not know.

'And I don't much care,' I added. 'Lucy, give us a song.'

There was a piano in the room. Lucy went to it and began to sing 'Some Day.' I whistled the accompaniment—I felt that I did not care what happened. I felt I should behave badly, that I had entered on the way of badness and must follow it. I fear I shocked Mrs. Crosthwaite sadly. I

knew I did. I did not care. I talked of the theory of perversity. The ladies seemed to think my head was turned. It may have been.

When lunch was cleared away, I walked round to my house. I found a crowd in my garden and several policemen. I thought it would be funny to ask what had happened, and I heard wonderful stories about myself. I heard that I had been burnt to ashes, and then that my throat had been cut, and I remember that I wished it had. There was nothing left of the house except the walls and unsightly heaps of ruins and ashes. My wife's portrait, blackened and partially destroyed, was propped against a laurel-bush, and looked with sorrowful eyes at our ruined home. I laughed, and said, 'Poor Dora!' Then I felt sentimental, and was for sitting on the grass and weeping. But just then a policeman who had recognised me walked up, and told me that what had been saved was in a shed in the back garden, and that I should do well to have it removed. I said I did not care what had been saved, that I had passed a wet sponge over the past and was going to start quite fresh. Prompted, however, by curiosity I walked to the shed, and finding there besides a few articles of furniture, a case of wine, invited the force to partake. The men, however, refused. I also found a book of poems, and I was much affected by reading it. I think it was Schiller, and I remember reading a portion of 'The Bell' to the sergeant and insisting on the lines 'Beneficial is the might of fire, When man watches and controls it.'

Then my landlord came up and said it was a sad case. I asked him if he really thought so. He asked me if I was insured, and I answered, 'Not I.' Then he said it was bad, very bad. He would not take a glass of wine, was not interested in Schiller, and walked away shaking his head. I jeered at him, behind his back. Then I thought I would go and sit among the blackened embers and play at Marius.

Just then, however, the picture-dealer to whom I had written about buying some of my pictures came up. He was much shocked when he heard what had happened. He

asked me if any of my pictures had been saved, and I answered, 'Certainly not.' Then I corrected myself and added, 'Except the portrait of Mrs. Wilson, there, against the laurel-bush, with which, of course, I could not think of parting.' He said, 'twas a great misfortune; I said, 'Yes, isn't it?' Then I added, 'Do you really think so?' I wanted to draw him aside. I told him to put the matter in my hands, and that I would make it all right for him. He did not seem to understand me. I could easily comprehend that. I did not understand myself. After awhile he walked away, and I saw him talking to a constable and shaking his head. I thought of calling out 'Old cheat,' but I restrained myself.

Meanwhile the crowd outside grew denser and denser, and additional constables were marched up from the station to control it. I was the object of much curiosity. Several newspaper men tried to get at me, but I refused to speak. I said 'Pooh! pooh!' to one and all. I did not know what I was doing there. I kept walking round my house; at one time I found myself sitting in my arbour waiting for tea. We had often sat there, my wife and I, and had taken tea together. Just opposite me was one wall of my picture-gallery, the other wall having fallen down. I could see the nails where the pictures had been, and there was a part of the frame that had contained a very costly Van Goyen. I looked at it with curiosity, and then found myself laughing.

I know that then I had no appreciation of my misfortune. I am sure that I felt my loss less than anyone in the crowd. I cannot explain this.

'After all,' I said, 'I have plenty of money, and then there is Mrs. Wolfe. I will go and live at my club whilst deciding what to do. I shall be near her then. As for my past, a wet sponge over it. Wiped out, eh?'

At times, however, I muttered, 'All the same, it is wretched about these pictures.'

I cannot say how I found my way back to Mrs. Crosthwaite's house, but find it I did, and was presently in the

drawing-room, where I saw Lucy crying over my wife's portrait, which had got there I do not know how.

She said, 'What a good thing it is the poor lady did not live to see this disaster.'

I answered, 'Yes, isn't it.'

We had tea, and I remember that I talked volubly all the while. I said that misfortune was the crucible in which true gold was tried. I said that I was ruined, but proposed to start afresh. I was very indifferent, I stated. It was not a little furniture or a few pictures that made me or marred me.

Mrs. Crosthwaite told me that Mrs. Hackett had left a message for me, saying that the fifty pounds just covered all expenses, and that there was no change. She had gone away in a four-wheeler. I professed great anxiety to know whether I had really paid enough. 'I don't like people to make sacrifices for me,' I said.

After tea, a little German tailor from the suburb came to measure me for some clothes. He kept dancing round me, saying, 'It really will be beautiful!' until he so annoyed me that I threatened to pull his ears. I chose black cloth. 'I am in mourning,' I said, 'for my house and for my son.'

When he had gone away I had a serious conversation with Mrs. Crosthwaite. I said I could not think of staying another night in her house. I had already abused her hospitality. However, she pressed me to stay at least the night.

'Your clothes will be ready to-morrow,' she added.

At the fall of night, after my intoxication had passed off, I felt supremely miserable. I then realized how I had lost all that I most cherished. The home where I had lived so many peaceful years with my wife was no more. My son had turned out a rogue, and had left me. I was a thief. And worse than all, I was in love with a woman whom I knew to be unworthy of me. It was my fatal passion for her that made me most unhappy—and yet how supremely happy! For when I thought of her I felt indifferent to home, and wealth, and child, and honour. She was far more than all

these things to me. I felt that I should be happy to sit hand in hand with her all the rest of my days.

Lucy bought me the *The Evening Gazette* that night. I read Mr. Backhouse's article with much interest, and thought my portrait a flattering one. He spoke of me as 'the well-known barrister,' and this pleased me immensely. But when I came to his description of my 'artistic treasures, now completely destroyed,' I felt like to weep.

Lucy was very good to me. She did all she could to cheer me when she saw how dismal I was. I thought, 'How I wish I could love you.' But I did not love her, and was thinking of the other one all the while. She struck me as very tedious, in spite of her kindness. I wanted to say, 'Oh, bother!' more than once. After all, I thought, it is no business of hers. Everybody has his misfortunes, and bears them as best he is able. I think there is a selfishness in pain—one likes to bear the immensity of one's disaster alone. Wounded animals, they say, crawl away to die in solitude.

I said to myself, 'Ah, how *she* will comfort me.' It was all my consolation to think that now *she* would have a reason to pet me.

Lucy saw that I was not sympathetic, and looked very sad, and presently desisted, to set about restoring the portrait. I felt sorry now the portrait had been saved. After all, if a picture was to remain over, why this one? I had greatly preferred a Corot or a Turner to her, with her reproachful eyes. I had failed in my duty to her. I had been unfaithful and disloyal since her death. I did not care to be reminded of it. A wet sponge over all—even over her. Yes, above all, over her.

Mrs. Crosthwaite asked me what I proposed to do on the morrow, and I told her my plan of leaving Wandsworth and of taking rooms in town. I said, that perhaps for the next week or two I should stay in the suburb near my home, as my presence would doubtless be needed by the police and the coroner.

'But why not stay on here?' said Mrs. Crosthwaite.

'Why go into lodgings? Are you not comfortable here?'

Lucy looked up from the picture.

'I am sure we are very glad to have you here,' she said.

Mrs. Crosthwaite smiled approvingly.

'I thought this afternoon,' she said, 'it would, perhaps, be better for you not to stay in the house; you know what horrible gossips we have for neighbours. But since then I have made up my mind that we will just suit ourselves. We are such good friends and such old friends, Mr. Wilson, are we not? that I think it would be unkind of you to leave us just now. At the least, you will be more comfortable here than in lodgings.'

'And I have hung the Corot in your bedroom,' said Lucy, blushing. 'Of course it is yours again now. Poor Mr. Wilson, it is the last of your flock. I could not think of keeping it after what has happened. I will take her portrait in exchange—at least, as long as you are here. You don't know,' she cried, 'how beautiful that picture makes your room look!'

My plans and projects then suddenly seemed to change. Yes, Mrs. Crosthwaite was right. I would be more comfortable in her house than elsewhere; and why should I not decide to stay on, not only for a week but for always. I knew that I could have Lucy for the asking, and that Mrs. Crosthwaite would only be too pleased to give me welcome in her house as her daughter's husband. Lucy, when I came to look at her, was indeed a fine woman, pretty and graceful, and was endowed with charming qualities. Far preferable, certainly, as a wife than the middle-aged and vulgar woman who of late had been so much in my thoughts. Besides, being practically ruined now, and having no home to offer her, what likelihood was there that Mrs. Wolfe would care to accept my hand and share my lot. She was a woman of pleasure, evidently extravagant, and would certainly not be content with what I had. Lucy, on the other hand, was, in my present position, an excellent *parti*, and by marrying her I should find at once an amiable and ac-

complished wife and a comfortable home. I could marry her, say in a month, and it really seemed the best thing I could do. Her tender affection would, I know, soon dispel my morbid love for the other. I should work hard at my profession, and we would save money—for I would tell her all; and by the time William Backhouse came out of prison I should be able to repay him, and be an honourable man again.

I think that Mrs. Crosthwaite, with her womanly instinct, divined my thoughts. She rose and left the room. The moment, the opportunity, had come.

I rose and walked towards Lucy. I think she too must have guessed what was passing through my mind, for she looked anxious and happy. I never saw so radiant a face. I was about to speak, and had already taken the blushing girl by the hand, when we were interrupted by the entrance of a servant, who brought me a letter.

I recognised the writing, and dropping Lucy's hands almost rudely, crossed over to the light and read it eagerly. It ran:

'DEAREST BOY,

'Awfully upset and shocked to hear what has happened. Poor old chappie! Come to me, and I'll try to cheer you up.

'Yours ever,

'DORA WOLFE.'

Lucy, sadly embarrassed, stood where I had left her trembling. There were tears in her eyes.

I put the letter in my pocket and looked at her.

No—no—no. I had been an ass. My happiness did not lie with her. I had escaped very narrowly.

Meanwhile, I felt I owed her an explanation. So I went up to her again, and once more clasping her hand, I said:

'I want to thank you, dear girl, for your great kindness to me. But, of course, I cannot think of taking back that——'

But here she tore herself away from me, and ran out of the room in tears.

I felt very glad when she had gone, as I had then opportunity to take out my letter again and to enjoy it, if I can use such an expression. 'Poor old chappie!' and 'dearest boy!' I was a middle-aged man, grave and reserved, with some pomposity of bearing.

I retired early to my room that night, and sat up some time writing. Before going upstairs, I had made a point of running out and buying a penny account-book. This, in careful penmanship, I labelled 'Mr. Backhouse's Deposit,' drawing up inside a credit and a debit column. On the credit side I entered the amount I had received, on the other the various sums that I had spent. I felt much relieved when I had done this. The writing was most careful; I remember I spent some time in erasing a blot I had made. When it was concluded, I put it in my pocket-book between the notes.

I slept the sleep of a just man that night, and woke up the next morning fully refreshed—myself again, in fact. I felt ashamed of my conduct to Lucy, and hardly liked to face her at breakfast. She was very sweet, as usual, and seemed resigned, though rather unhappy. Mrs. Crosthwaite still looked anxious.

The morning's post brought me a number of letters from all parts—letters of sympathy from friends and acquaintances, and some had even been written by strangers. Messrs. Spedding wrote very heartily, and placed their purse at my disposal. I had similar offers of help from others, and several invitations to people's houses. All these letters gave me great pleasure, as I had thought, as a sense of my moral degradation grew upon me, that I must also have grown vile in the eyes of others, but was reassured now. The letter, however, which pleased me most was one from Mrs. Wolfe, a long, effusive letter it was, vulgarly written, perhaps, but very comforting.

The next one was far different:—It was an anonymous letter, evidently written in a disguised hand:

'So Bill's money brought you no luck,' it ran. 'Burnt Jack to death, did you? Well, you wait and see.'

I then understood that the two attacks that had been made upon me within the short time that had elapsed since I received the deposit had been made by people—probably confederates of the burglar—who knew of my having his money in keeping. I had suspected something of the kind before; my suspicions were now confirmed. I was considerably relieved, however, to see from the note that these believed that the money had been destroyed in the flames. I should henceforth be left in peace, and have the free use of the money in my pocket. As for the concluding threat, it produced no effect whatever upon me. I had read my letters through, and was sitting in the breakfast-room, deliberating on my plans for the day, when Lucy came in and shut the door behind her. She came straight up to me and said, without any preface:

'Mr. Wilson, you are treating me badly.'

I said: 'How so?'

'Oh, you know,' she said, 'nobody better.'

I jumped to my feet, thrust my letters in my pocket, and strode out of the house, taking my hat with me.

I walked straight away to a lodging-house I knew of, and engaged two rooms for a week.

I then sent for the tailor, and insisted on his providing me with clothes at once, no matter how they might fit. By noon I had a summary outfit. I then sent round the clothes I had been wearing to Mrs. Crosthwaite's with a letter of thanks. I told her what I had done, and added that, considering her daughter's peace of mind and my own, I had done the only possible thing.

My messenger returned shortly afterwards carrying the two pictures.

'There was no answer,' he said.

I drove my fist through the portrait of my unhappy wife, and at first thought of flinging the Corot into the street. I, however, reflected, and taking down a chromo-lithograph of the Queen and Royal Family, hung it up in the place.

'I have had enough troubles,' I said; 'I will have no more!'

I spent that afternoon in writing my letters, and in sending my address to those interested. I was very anxious to go to town, for the purpose of seeing Mrs. Wolfe, but did not care to present myself dressed as I was. I determined to wait until my tailor in London, to whom I had written, should have executed my orders. Towards the evening my clerk came down to talk matters over, and also to fetch funds for rent, salary, and expenses. I kept him to dinner. There was a heavy list of items to be entered on the debit side of my book that might.

The morrow was the day of the inquest. It was a tedious affair. I spent no pleasant time before the Coroner, because I concealed my suspicions as to the motive of the attack, and my certain knowledge that the other burglar was the man I had seen hanging about in Duchess Street. I did this first, because of course I could not explain about the Backhouse deposit, and secondly, because I did not care to mix up the lady's name in a matter of such unpleasant notoriety. The verdict was one of accidental death.

I will pass over the next week, which was one full of troubles and anxiety. I was worried first by my landlord, and then by the representatives of the insurance company with whom the house had been insured. Local tradesmen also showed great want of sympathy, and insisted on immediate payment of accounts of which I had really no previous knowledge; I had also to pay large claims made against my son. Of the Crosthwaites I neither heard nor saw anything more, and was ungrateful enough to be glad of this. As soon as I had a little breathing time, I left Wandsworth for London, and took a room at my club in St. James's Square. I had not had the time until then to go to Duchess Street, and my first errand, after my arrival in town, was to go there.

## CHAPTER IX.

### MORE ROGUERY.

It was the lady herself who let me in.

'You bad boy,' she said, 'to keep away so long; I am very angry with you indeed.'

'And I who had come for comfort. You scold me now.'

'Well, to tell the truth,' she said, as we entered the sitting-room and took our accustomed seats on the sofa, side by side, 'I am in want of comfort myself—perhaps more than you are. You are a man, you see, and have friends. I am a poor widow, and am alone in the world.'

Here her voice faltered, and tears stood in her eyes.

'My dear lady,' I cried, 'what is the matter?'

'Ah,' she said, 'I hear her coming. Just step behind that curtain and listen to what is going to follow. It will explain.'

Considerably puzzled, I walked to the window and concealed myself as she had directed. At the same time a rap was heard at the door.

It was Mrs. Wolfe's landlady.

'Well?' said Mrs. Wolfe.

'It's to know, mum,' said the landlady, in a disagreeable tone that was far from being respectful, 'what you have decided to do about the matter I spoke to you about this morning.'

'I have told you,' said Mrs. Wolfe, 'that I can do nothing until this matter is settled.'

'Aye, but I can't explain that to my landlord, nor to my baker, nor to my butcher neither.'

'The affair will be settled soon, and then you will be paid.'

'But it isn't as if you had no money.'

'I really have none at present.'

'Well, how was it yesterday you gave that man ten pounds?'

'How do you know?'

'I saw him counting it, as he came downstairs.'

'Oh, it was an old debt. It had to be paid.'

'Well, and my debt? Oughtn't that to be paid too? I think board and lodging—yes, and washing—ought to go before everything else.'

'So they ought. But what can I do? My solicitors refuse any advance, and it happened that when my husband died I had but a very small sum at my bankers'.'

'I shouldn't be so pressing,' said the landlady, 'if it wasn't that I am sorely in need of money. You know, of course, that the French gentleman on the second floor has been gone two days, and his bill unpaid, and no signs of his coming back; all his effects gone too—let down by a string, they say, into the street to another foreign gentleman. I cannot go on without money, I simply cannot. Not that I want you to go, for I have other rooms unlet. But unless you give me some money, I cannot provide you with any food, or things. I really have not the money to lay out. And, oh dear, how very useful those ten pounds, or even half, that you gave to that man yesterday would have been! I know you are a lady,' she continued, 'and what it is to be a widow I myself am well aware. I am sure when you come into your own you will pay me, and handsomely. But how are we to live till then?'

'You know that I pawned most of my things to pay you before. Shall I pawn the rest?'

'Well, think if it would not be better. I am at my last sovereign.' With these words the door was closed.

I came out from my retreat.

'Well,' said Mrs. Wolfe, who was looking a picture of melancholy, 'did you hear?'

I nodded my head gravely.

'Well, don't you think I want comfort?'

'Something of the sort,' I said.

'It is too wretched,' she cried, wringing her hands, 'now, is it not? I am almost ashamed that you have heard—I feel I ought to have kept it to myself. But you are a true friend, are you not?

'I hope so,' I said.

There was an awkward pause. Then she said, clasping her hands affectionately on my arm :

'Is it not too wretched ?'

'I hardly understand,' I said. 'I thought you had been left so very comfortably off. You spoke of thousands.'

'Yes, and—is it not annoying ?—I cannot get one penny of my money.'

'How so ?'

'My husband's lawyers are making all kinds of difficulties about certificates and things. They want a number of papers to prove me myself. I do what I can, but I don't understand the business.'

'It is your baptism certificate that is wanted, I suppose ?'

'Yes, I think so. I don't know where to get it. I don't know where I was christened, and have nobody to tell me. My mother died long ago, and I have no relations or friends.'

'The usual course in such cases is to advertise, offering a reward to vergers and clerks.'

'So I believe. My lawyers have recommended me to do this—but I don't believe it would be any good. I am inclined to throw the whole thing up, yet, God knows, the old man owed me a lot. My life as his wife was a martyrdom, and I was a good wife to him. Now, Mr. Wilson, you see how I am situated. I am without a penny, and you heard just now that my landlady refuses to give me any food. I—I—I don't know what I shall become. I suppose—I—shall—starve—and—I—I—don't—much—care if I—do—o—o—o.' She had broken down, and was sobbing violently, with her face pressed to my bosom.

This was exceedingly distressing just then. I was out of funds, and practically a ruined man. Of Backhouse's money there now remained barely eight hundred pounds; and I had intended this sum to carry me on until I had earned fresh fees, and to help me to take a new house and buy furniture. I had grown very chary of money during the last two days, and clung to each penny as if it were a fortune. Besides, what right had I to use Backhouse's money, which

the poor fellow had entrusted to my honour, for any purpose whatever? This scruple took me, then.

I muttered something about stepping round to her lawyers and seeing what could be done, when, suddenly recovering her composure, she put me the question I had been dreading, straight: 'Will you lend me a hundred pounds?' she asked.

I was struck dumb. I had expected her to ask for a loan, but I certainly never anticipated a demand for such a sum. I stammered something vague about being unprepared, when volubly, she continued:

'Oh, Mr. Wilson, you cannot refuse me. You do not know how unhappy I am. It is dreadful for a lady who has been accustomed to an easy life all her days to be troubled like I am. All my clothes are in pawn. I have nothing to put on when I go out. My landlady will give me nothing to eat. What is a hundred pounds to a man like you?'

This flattered me.

'Nothing,' I said.

'Well, there, you see. I knew. And you don't refuse me, do you?'

'I was only wondering whether I had such a sum on me,' I said, feeling foolishly in my waistcoat pocket.

'A cheque on a piece of blank paper, with your signature across a penny stamp would do,' she said.

'I was thinking of that,' I said, wondering at her very business-like manner. 'But it would be better if I gave it to you in cash.'

'Certainly,' she said.

At that minute I had a vague idea of rushing out of the house and of turning my back on her for ever. But I did not do it; and, my vanity suggesting, I walked up to the bell-rope and rang for the landlady.

When she arrived I magnificently drew a £500 note from my pocket and bade her fetch me change. I think that as I selected the note from my pocket-book, I heard Mrs. Wolfe mutter something that sounded like 'I thought so.'

The landlady was much overpowered, and withdrew with many curtseys.

'Oh, you dear, good boy!' cried Mrs. Wolfe, running up to me, and clasping my hand. 'You have saved my life. But I must write you out an I.O.U. for the amount at once.'

'It is not necessary,' I drawled, now thoroughly infatuated with myself; 'I do not take such documents from ladies: I am only too happy to oblige them—especially'—and here I bowed—'when the lady is so charming as you are.'

It was delightful to see how happy she was. Whilst the landlady was away—and she was away a long time, till I almost feared she had absconded for good—she chatted gaily and brilliantly, and charmed me completely. At times she ran to the piano and played and sang, then back to the sofa by my side, and more pleasant talk. I considered these hundred pounds excellently well laid-out. I brightened up and chatted too, and we spent quite a delightful time.

The woman came back in an hour to say that she could not get change any way, and had been as far as the Bank, which she had found closed. I said it did not matter, and that I had other money.

'And,' I added, 'as you refuse to serve the lady, I have advised her to leave these rooms. It is rather too good of you to be hard on her, seeing that you are getting double rent here.'

The landlady retired abashed. I think my note had impressed her; otherwise she looked as if she had a very good tongue of her own.

'Now, madam,' I said, 'will you do me the pleasure of coming to dine with me? We will go to Kettner's, or the Café Royal, and have a pleasant little dinner.'

'Will it be proper?' she asked demurely.

'Of course. Who will see us? Let's have some fun.'

'Oh yes, it will be fun!' she cried, clapping her hands like a girl fresh from school, and excited at the prospect of an adventure. 'I'll run and put on my bonnet at once. But'—and here her face fell—'I—I should like to—to pay that woman first.'

'Oh—I forgot!' I said. 'Yes, of course. Well, here's the money.'

I gave it her in banknotes, which she stuffed in her pocket and went out of the room to dress. She said nothing more about paying the landlady, but may have done it whilst away.

I utilized the time of waiting to make an entry in the little book—'Lent to Mrs. Wolfe, £100.' Then I strolled about the room, and feeling hot, picked up the red fan and cooled myself at the window. Noticing that the light looked very pretty as it came through the feathers, I propped it against the pane. Afterwards, going to the piano, I left it there.

Presently Mrs. Wolfe returned. She was gorgeously arrayed, and wore many jewels. I was astonished at this, after what she had told me, but seeing my looks of wonder, she whispered, 'I have just had them fetched out of pawn.' I might have wondered at this statement, but she looked so pretty I could think of nothing but of the delight of her company.

I had quite changed the opinion I had formed about her. Was it that I had sunk, or that she had risen? I do not know. If once I had found her lacking in certain of the undescribable qualities of the lady, I now considered her every inch a gentlewoman. It is true that in her conversation that afternoon she had shown herself brilliant and accomplished.

Not finding a hansom in Duchess Street, we walked to the Strand, and drove from there to the Café Royal. I conducted madame upstairs, and gave Fritz an order for a very recherché little dinner. There were several young bloods in the room, and I was much flattered to see that my companion was the object of much admiration. She really looked brilliant! I was more in love with her than ever. The dinner helped, and the champagne helped, and I made up my mind to propose that night. Poor Lucy! the simple girl, with her tedious domestic ways, I had quite forgotten.

I think the lady had some idea of what was passing in my

mind, and played to win. No *jeune première* could have played the *amoureuse* so delicately and well. It was like Madame Bernhardt in *La Tosca*—a delicious wooing, that ran through my veins like the generous wine we were drinking. Oh! her adorable eyes, and the mother-of-pearl sheen of her neck and arms!

How stupid I had been to think that she lacked in education! Why, she was a most cultivated woman, spoke several languages, knew the Continent as I know Lincoln's Inn Fields, and could take me out of my depth on modern painting and literature. But what pleased me most in her was the surprising fact that she had a very good legal knowledge, could quote an Act or a case as readily as an attorney-general, and was full of feminine ruse and eloquence which might have made a fortune at the bar.

'Ah! here,' I thought, at the third bottle of champagne, 'is the woman I should have met and married long ago. I should have been Lord Chancellor by this time with such a wife.'

Happily, I opined, it was not too late.

'Mr. Wilson,' she whispered of a sudden, 'there is a young man sitting at a table over there, who keeps staring at you and me in a way that is exceedingly annoying. Look at the fellow! I am sure he is drunk. I wish you would have him spoken to by the manager.'

I looked round indignantly, and saw—my son! Yes, my son—the boy I had thought in mid-ocean, on his way to America and an amended life. He looked very handsome, the scoundrel, though his face was considerably flushed. He was in very elegant evening dress. I will not describe the young person who was his dinner-companion. So he had not gone to America at all! His courage had probably failed him at Liverpool; and provided with a large sum—which, like a fool, I had given him—he had returned to London to lead the only kind of life that gave him pleasure. I felt very angry, and more so as I reflected that, though he must have known of the disaster that had befallen our home, he had never written me a word of sympathy.

When he saw me—of course, he recognised me at once—he laughed foolishly, and bending over his table, whispered something to his companion, which made her giggle immoderately. I made up my mind that as I had once disowned him it would be weak to recognise him now, and turned my head impatiently away.

'It is some drunken young fool,' I said.

'Ah!—I thought you recognised him.'

'I thought I did,' I muttered.

I was silent then for a time, and very downcast. What evil fruits this money had brought forth!

'Cheer up, old boy, and don't give way to the blues. You were so jolly just now.'

But all her pretty ways and words were in vain; nor did coffee and liqueur help. I felt very mournful and misanthropical, and was so tedious that my ennui communicated itself to my companion, who presently began to speak of feeling tired and of wanting to go home. I made no opposition, paid the bill, helped her on with her cloak and into a hansom, home. We alighted at the corner of Duchess Street—both silent. I had nothing to say, and she—she seemed offended at my sudden change of manner. She would not allow me to accompany her so far as her house. 'I shall catch the blues, too, if I walk any further with you,' she said. And so we parted.

I watched her walking home. A man, who was hanging about outside her house, joined her at the door. She seemed surprised to see him there, and I thought there was some altercation going on. The man kept pointing to the window, and once she crossed and looked up. I was just going to run down the street to send the man about his business—I took him for some drunken pest—when I saw her door open; the two entering.

I grew quite cold, and wished I had the courage to break down the door, and to overwhelm the couple with my wrath. Then I determined to watch, with no fixed object or determination. At times I thought of walking down to the river and of jumping in. But I had not long to wait, for presently

the man came out again, and walked up the street at a rapid rate towards me. He was whistling gaily. I stepped aside into a dark corner to let him by, and he did not notice me. As soon as he had passed, I came out and followed him. Down the Strand, and into the public-house at the entrance to the Lyceum pit. I also entered, and seeing him in the public department, entered the private bar, where I could observe him unseen. He was a coarse, ugly fellow, of a very low type. But though a common enough face, it seemed to me I had seen the fellow before. I could not remember where. Recent events had dazed my head somewhat, and perhaps that night I was more confused than usually. I took something to drink, keeping my eyes riveted on the fellow. It was too ridiculous to consider him as a rival, and that reflection, though I was still very uneasy, considerably calmed my indignation. I was wondering who he was, when I suddenly remembered that it might be the fellow whom I had seen outside her house before. The ex-footman who always pestered her for money, was it not? Yes, it was.

Considerably relieved, if still rather mystified, I was going to turn away, when an altercation arose between the landlord and a person in the public bar, the identical fellow, in fact, whom I had been watching.

'Here, I cannot change this!' said the bar-tender, waving a piece of paper which looked like a banknote. 'It's not likely.'

'I tell you it's a good 'un,' cried the man. 'Haven't you ever seen a Bank of England note before in this shop. 'No!' —this with a deprecating air. 'Now I come to think of it, I should not say you had.'

'Be that as it may,' said the bar-tender quietly, 'I cannot change this for you. It is a rule of the house. We don't even change fivers from gentlemen of your class, and as to a fifty-pound note, I couldn't really think of it.'

'Well, I have no other money.'

'But you must pay for those gins all the same.'

'How can I when you refuse to change my money? It's all I have.'

'I tell you I can't change it. It may be a stumer for all I know.'

'And I tell you it's a good one. Here, you change it.'

'I won't. I cannot. We haven't got the cash here!'

'I thought not. Well, then, give it me back!'

'And your drinks?'

'You're beautiful, you are. You refuse my money, yet you want me to pay.'

A thought struck me here. Beckoning to the landlord, I whispered to him:

'I just want a fifty-pound note to send off. That one looks right enough. I will change it for the man. Only I don't want him to see me, so keep quiet.'

The man winked.

'I understand,' he said; 'Scotland Yard'—and handed me the note in exchange for fifty pounds in small notes and gold.

'But stay,' I added, 'you must get the fellow to sign his name on the back.'

'I thought so,' said the man. Then, taking back the note, he called out: 'Well, it appears it is against Act of Parliament to refuse legal tender, and I'll take the note and change it; only, I am in my right to ask you to sign your name and address on the back of it; otherwise it can't be done.'

'Ah, you see,' sneered the fellow insolently. 'Good Lord, to think of such a fuss about a wretched fifty! Well, give us hold of the pen.'

He scrawled his name on the back of the note, and was just handing it to the landlord, when, seeing the handful of notes in the other's hands, he drew his back, and said: 'The law's alike for all, and I don't take these notes unless you sign your name on each. There's seven of them. It will be as good as a copybook exercise for you. I dare say you needs it.' A loud and approving guffaw from the crowd around.

'John,' cried the landlord, thoroughly annoyed, 'just step out and call a policeman. We must have this fellow seen to.'

'Oh! bother,' said the man. 'Don't let's make a row.

Here's the note.' He flung it on the table, and picking up his change slouched out into the passage. I took the note from the landlord's hand, and thrust it into my pocket, and followed him out. I saw him make across Waterloo Bridge, and presently lost sight of him.

I did not look at the banknote until I reached my room at the club. It was, as I had more than once suspected, one of those I had given to Mrs. Wolfe that afternoon, and of which I had noted the numbers. On the back was scrawled a name which meant nothing—'John Smith.' It seemed to me, however, that the writing was familiar to me.

## CHAPTER X.

### BLACK JOE AND 'THE YARD.'

When on the morrow I carefully thought over what had happened the previous night, I came to wish that I had strength of mind sufficient to break at once with the past, to pass a sponge over my *accointances* with Mrs. Wolfe, and to begin once more the quiet, laborious life that I had led until circumstances brought me into contact with William Backhouse. But there I was weak—I was weak. I felt I could not help myself. I felt it impossible to retrace my steps, impossible to forget. For I was deeply in love. I thought that the only thing to save me would be marriage with a devoted wife, whom I should love sufficiently to give her the guidance of my life and actions. I felt like a child who in the face of a difficulty runs to seek protection in its mother's skirts. Lucy was, I felt, just the woman who could make me again what I had been, and better; but I did not love her, and could not be happy with her. I had already endured one joyless matrimony without love, and could not re-enter the desert. It was a vicious circle I was in. To be saved I must marry, but I could not marry anyone but

just the woman from whose influence and surroundings I desired to be rescued.

I was hopelessly considering all these things that morning when I received a visit from the amiable Mr. Spedding, who had come to renew his expressions of sympathy and offers of help.

'It's a serious thing being burnt out like that,' he said, 'and I understand, Mr. Wilson, that you were not insured. So it may be you are rather inconvenienced just now——'

'Oh no,' I said; 'I have several hundred pounds at my disposal, Mr. Spedding.'

'I am glad to hear it. But that oughtn't to prevent you accepting my hospitality. You cannot go on living in your club indefinitely, and more melancholy quarters in this season I cannot well imagine. Come and stay at my house, where a ready welcome waits you both from me and Mrs. Spedding.'

'I am hardly in a fit frame of mind to be anybody's guest just now,' I said; 'but, all the same, I am heartily obliged to you for your invitation, and if I can, will accept it. But not just now.'

'I understand that,' said Mr. Spedding, preparing to leave. 'Oh, by the way, I forgot. I have a letter for you. It's from our friend Backhouse, from Pentonville, and is addressed, as you see, to you, care of us. It arrived at the office this morning. I wonder what the fellow is troubling you about.'

I took the letter with a loudly-pulsing heart, and having satisfied myself that the seal had not been tampered with, thrust it brusquely into my pocket, saying, 'Whatever it is, I am not going to be troubled about it now. Possibly he wants me to apply to the Home Office for his release.'

As soon as Mr. Spedding had gone, I opened the letter. It was very short.

'Honoured Sir,

'Having earned the privilege of receiving a visitor, may I ask you to condescend to come and see me at the

prison on Tuesday next at 11 a.m. I am extremely anxious to see you.

'Your obedient humble servant,
'WILLIAM BACKHOUSE.'

'I suppose the fellow has heard of my misfortune and fears lest his money is lost also. By Jove!'—and here a wicked thought struck me—'what more natural? The money was placed in my bureau-drawer, all my furniture was burnt, the notes included. It would free me for ever from my anxiety. No, I won't go. After all, why should I? I am not at the beck and call of every convicted thief, I suppose? I certainly shan't go. But there, if I don't, I shall arouse his suspicions, and then—— Would it not be better to settle the matter at once? Well, I'll see.'

Just then one of the club servants rapped at my door and said there was a gentleman waiting to see me in the receiving-room downstairs. He had come on urgent business, he said. I was so full of anxiety, and felt so nervous, perplexed and worried, that I feared to meet anybody. Who could tell whether it was not William Backhouse himself, escaped and come to ask for the rendering of accounts. The idea was an absurd one, of course, but my head was full of William Backhouse, and, after all, who could tell?

'I can't see him, Walter,' I said; 'I can't see anybody.' The waiter went away, but presently returned, saying:

'It is a gentleman from Scotland Yard. He insists on seeing you. It is most important.'

I think I turned pale, for I noticed Walter looking at me with a very curious expression of surprise. Presently he went away, and I breathed again.

But in a few minutes a knock came at my door, and in answer to my irritable 'Come in,' a stranger presented himself. He was followed by Walter, who made apologetic signs behind his back as much as to say the trespass was not his fault.

'I am very sorry to disturb you, Mr. Wilson,' said the

gentleman politely, 'but I am forced to see you. I am only acting under orders, and have to ask you to be kind enough to come round to Scotland Yard. I have a cab in waiting at the door.'

I was standing by the window, and looked out as he spoke. There was a cab standing outside in the square, with a burly policeman on the box.

'Oh, certainly, Mr.— Mr.——' I stammered.

'Dixon,' said the stranger; 'Inspector Dixon.'

'Certainly, Inspector Dickworth,' I rejoined, in great perturbation. 'I am entirely at your disposal. I did not know who it was when the servant told me of your call, or I would not have kept you waiting. Oh, certainly not. You must just give me time to get ready, and I'll come at once. Sit down, Mr. Baxon, I shall be ready directly.'

I felt quite assured that the inspector had come to arrest me. I should have been considerably puzzled to give the reason why. Walter evidently thought the case looked bad, and kept severely aloof from me. I think if I could have escaped I should have done. My conduct was utterly absurd; I felt it to be so, but could not help myself.

I was so impressed with a sense of guilt, that I felt it very delicate and considerate on the part of the inspector to be so polite and not to put handcuffs on me. As we walked down the stairs together, I very nearly asked him what was the charge against me, but restrained myself on seeing that Walter was within earshot.

Mr. Dixon did not speak a word after we got into the cab. I fancy he found me very strange. I found his silence alarming. As we drove along, I wondered what had brought this calamity upon me. I had embezzled money, it is true, but not in a way that exposed me to the law. It could not be that. Was it that I had been seen in the company of Mrs. Wolfe? and was Mrs. Wolfe—— That might be so. Or was it that my unhappy son had got into fresh trouble? No, it could not be that, I should not have been arrested in such a case.

Presently the cab turned under the gloomy archway,

jolted over the cobbled pavement, and drew up before an office door. The policeman on the box jumped down, opened the cab-door with the politeness of any lackey, and ushered us in.

I was received with politeness by an elderly gentleman, who said his name was Scott. I had noticed on the door, on entering, the words 'Criminal Investigation Department.'

Mr. Scott looked at my disordered and confused expression with some commiseration. Then he said:

'I am very sorry to trouble you, Mr. Wilson, as I know how disturbed and upset you must be after the recent deplorable event. But the interests of justice—the interests of justice, sir, are our first consideration, and you—as a distinguished member of the bar——'

'What have I done?' I groaned.

Mr. Scott did not hear what I said, for he bowed at my words, and added:

'Very natural; quite what I expected.' Then he added: 'The fact is, Mr. Wilson, we think we have got the fellow who attempted to murder you the other night. He was arrested last night in the neighbourhood of Waterloo Station. It is a fellow who goes by the name of Black Joe, and we have had him in suspicion for some days. He is on the premises; and why I sent for you, Mr. Wilson, was to ask you to have a look at him, and to tell me if you recognise him as the man who attacked you in the garden. It will be all the evidence we shall want to take the case before a magistrate to-morrow. We shall adopt the usual course, Mr. Dixon,' he continued, turning to the inspector. 'Place the man in room C with other men. Of course, see that his handcuffs are removed. When you are ready, inform me, and I will take Mr. Wilson in.'

Inspector Dixon bowed and retired.

'And now, Mr. Wilson,' said Mr. Scott, pulling open a bureau-drawer, and taking out a little picture. 'Give me your opinion on that. A colour, eh? A finish! What a beautiful piece of marble—and what a perfect sea! And

look at the lady's robes. Wouldn't you say they came direct from Liberty's?'

'Liberty Hall, indeed!' I laughed, not knowing what I said.

Mr. Scott did not hear me, being in ecstasies over his picture. I knew he did not want my opinion, but my praise, and being, for some reason I cannot well define, abjectly desirous of conciliating this police official, I gave it as much praise as I could. He was delighted. We had quite forgotten Black Joe by the time Mr. Dixon returned to say that the arrangements in room C were complete.

'He's a cunning dog!' said Inspector Dixon as we walked down the passage. 'He had a red handkerchief round his neck when he came in, and as soon as the handcuffs were taken off him he took it off and put it into his pocket. Of course you understand why.'

I recognised the man the moment I entered the room and faced the sordid group of ragged wretches who were huddled together at its far end—not indeed as my assailant on two occasions, for I was convinced that the person who attacked me in the lane and the burglar were one and the same, but as the man I had often seen at Mrs. Wolfe's house —the fellow I had followed to the public-house the previous evening. He looked the most unconcerned of the lot, and had placed himself in the front. It is possible Black Joe had the philosophy of Dupin, and had read Poe's 'Stolen Letter.'

The fellow saw at a glance that I had recognised him, for his face fell. He looked hard at me, as if to intimidate me. A wretch behind him kept making signs to me, as if to call my attention to the fact that he was the man I was wanted to recognise. Both the policemen noticed this foul play, but to my surprise said nothing to stop it.

I pretended to scan each hideous face with care. Black Joe breathed again, and resumed his unconcerned attitude.

At last I said, 'I am very sorry, Mr. Scott, but I recognise no one here. It is true I never saw my assailant. The night was dark, and I was so confused——'

Mr. Scott looked very disappointed. 'Look again, Mr. Wilson,' he said. 'You are certain to remember the fellow. Dixon, just arrange that lot in a row, and—here!' Then he whispered certain words in his subordinate's ear.

Mr. Dixon approached the group and arranged them in a row. Acting, doubtless, on his chief's instructions, he put Black Joe in a prominent place on the right—nearest to me, in fact.

'Now scrutinize each face, Mr. Wilson. That red-haired fellow now, or that black—*that black-bearded* hang-dog here on the right! Don't you recognise him?'

I think that even if I had not made up my mind to say nothing about my previous acquaintance with the man—and for many reasons, including one of self-protection, I had determined to say nothing—this would have decided me not to give the fellow up. It was such an abominable want of fair-play.

'No,' I said, shaking my head, as if much disappointed. 'But stay!' I cried with feigned excitement, 'that old fellow there, in the gray beard and jersey—that might be the man.'

'Sorry I can't oblige you, governor,' said the person alluded to, with a mock bow which made all his companions except Black Joe laugh; 'but it just so happens——'

'Silence!' commanded the chief. 'The man is right, though. It cannot be he; he has only just come out of gaol, and is up here for some effects belonging to him. But, Mr. Wilson, he whispered, didn't you notice the man who did not laugh just now—here, this fellow on the right?'

'Yes,' I said, 'but I certainly do not recognise him.'

'Well,' sighed the policeman, 'I am sorry. We were sure it was he. A well-known thief. Why, yesterday, when he was taken, we found upwards of fifty pounds on him in notes and silver. We must try and get him convicted, somehow or other. But the worst is, there is no charge and no evidence against him. Come now, Mr. Wilson, don't you recognise him?'

'No,' I said, firmly and decisively. Then I added, 'The air is very unpleasant here. I should like to go away.'

The air was unpleasant, certainly; but what was more so, was the look of gratitude towards me that now beamed on Black Joe's hideous face. 'You're a pal,' is what he seemed to say, and I felt the distinction awarded with a bitter shame.

Walter was evidently surprised to see me back so soon. I rated him severely for disobeying my orders, and threatened to report him to the committee. He was so frightened, that it was some time before he dared to show his face to me again. When he did at last reappear, it was to bring me a letter, which he said had been left by a lady shortly after I had been driven away. It was from Mrs. Wolfe, enclosing me a cheque for the £100, with a note.

'DEAREST BOY,

'The horrid solicitors, co-trustees, or whatever their bothering name is, have been less horrid than usual, and have advanced me a sum for present needs. So the first thing I do is to return you the money you so generously lent me. I was not mistaken in my boy.

'Tout à vous.

'WOLFE.'

This was the woman I had been suspecting. This—— But—'Hullo, Walter, a cab!' And off to Lombard Street to cash the cheque. Yes, perfectly in order. Would I take it in gold or notes? I forget how I took it; but it was with rapture—not for the value of the money, but because its receipt proved to me how abominably unjust I had been; that the woman was a lady after all, an honest, respectable person.

As I drove home from Lombard Street, the newsboys were crying—'ARREST OF THE WANDSWORTH BURGLAR!' I bought a paper, which contained a good portrait and a short biography of Black Joe. I read that I had been at Scotland Yard that morning, and had recognised the man.

Was this a police ruse, or a press canard? I did not know. I hardly cared. I was back in my love for Mrs. Wolfe, and I could think of nothing but of her, and of how cruelly I had wronged her in thought.

I dare not inquire whether there was not also a factor of interest in my new-born enthusiasm. Did I perhaps find Mrs. Wolfe entering into the enjoyment of a fortune a more worthy person than Mrs. Wolfe in grave financial difficulties? Yesterday the reek of the pawnshop. To-day the pleasant perfume of wealth and luxury. With what an airy gesture had Messrs. ——'s cashier cashed her cheque. Rothschild's signature could not have been more promptly and unhesitatingly honoured.

She was pretty, she was honest, she loved me. She had money, and would soon have more. Why should I hesitate?

I pushed up the trap in the roof of the cab and told the driver to go to Duchess Street.

On the way I stopped at a jeweller's and bought a pretty turquoise ring. I may say that on leaving the bank I had determined to avoid every expense, so as to keep at least what was left for its lawful owner, and had at the bank door long debated as to whether I should go home in an omnibus or walk. I had finally decided on a hansom cab. The turquoise ring was the second breach of my self-made promise. However, it would bring back its value a hundred, a thousand fold. It was to be her engagement-ring.

'Mrs. Wolfe?' I asked, as Mrs. Worthing presented herself in answer to my knock.

'Not in.'

'Ah. When do you think she'll be back?'

'Never, I hope.'

'How so?'

'She's gone. And a good riddance.'

'Gone! I don't understand.'

'I do. Gone, I say. Won't be back. Came back in a flurry this afternoon, packed up her boxes, paid my bill, and away. Glad she's gone. My house was getting quite a bad

name, with all the dissolute fellows that came hanging round.'

'Did she leave no address?'

'No, she didn't. I would not have kept it if she had. And I'm busy making tea—so——'

'Oh, I forgot. Mrs. Worthing,' I cried, as a parting shot, 'I met Mr. Field to-day. He is——'

Here the door was slammed to in my face.

There was a sort of porter who waited about in Duchess Street to carry luggage and run errands for the various lodging-houses. He had been standing near me while the above conversation was proceeding, and had heard what had passed. As soon as Mrs. Worthing had slammed the door in my face, he came up and touched his cap, and said:

'It's quite true, sir. The lady's off. I carried her boxes myself and put them on a cab. She told the driver to go to Cannon Street, and to drive fast. A good lady she was. Thank you, sir.'

I gave the man a shilling, jumped into my cab, and drove off to the club.

There, too late! There, I had lost her. Fool! fool! fool! I had let my happiness slip between my fingers.

## CHAPTER XI.

### DEEPER DEPTHS.

It was in an utterly wretched frame of mind that I reached my club—I had almost written my home—and there found awaiting me, note-book in hand, the irrepressible *Evening Gazette* reporter, who had come, he explained, to ask if it was true, as published in the papers, that I had recognised 'Black Joe' at Scotland Yard that morning. I told him the facts and sent him away rejoicing.

Two days later, during which time I had moped and fretted over Mrs. Wolfe's letters as my only consolation, I happened

to read in the papers that the man who had been arrested had been discharged. The same evening I received a letter from an anonymous writer, who said: 'You are a thorough brick, and I shan't forget it. A time may come when I shall be able to repay you, and, you bet, I will.'

If Black Joe had sent me Mrs. Wolfe's address, it would have been the best repayment he could have made.

I had made such feeble efforts as I could, by inquiries at the bank, at Mrs. Worthing's, and at her solicitors', to find out where she had gone, but with no avail. I was supremely unhappy. Much lucrative business was offered me, and my clerk kept laying most excellent briefs before me. He said my recent notoriety had warranted his doubling my fees—but I refused briefs and retainers alike, and was as miserable and retiring as a love-sick schoolboy.

It was about this time that I became what I had never been before—a pleasure-seeking man. I went to theatres, frequented parties, organized recherché dinners at the fashionable restaurants. On Sundays I arranged picnic parties to go up the river, and in every way began to lead a dissipated life. My sum of ready money melted away, but I took no heed of it. All that I wanted was to dispel unhappy memories, to fill an aching void.

After a long debate with myself I had determined to accept William Backhouse's invitation, and in due course presented myself at Pentonville Prison. I saw the man—who was looking remarkably well and happy, and who had, apparently, earned the esteem of the prison authorities by his good conduct—in a small room reserved for the use of people visiting the prisoners. A warder was present at our interview. He had made me understand that he could be deaf if it was made worth his while, and I was horrified to see that he had apparently understood me to say that this was my desire, for he kept aloof while we talked, and left me to face a very trying ordeal alone.

'It is very good of you to have come, sir,' whined the prisoner.

'I could hardly refuse,' I said, 'I am not busy just now.'

'Not out of work, I hope,' he cried, looking up hastily.

I smiled.

'I heard of the fire and the burglary,' he said. 'You see, we know pretty well what is going on outside, though we are not supposed to. I could tell you the result of the Croydon election of Saturday as correctly as any of the swells at your club. But that's outside of the question.' Then he lowered his voice: 'It's about that little bit of property, sir, I am very anxious. Is it all right?'

The question had come. I was, however, prepared.

I pretended to fear the warder might overhear the conversation, and so I merely nodded in the affirmative.

'Got it on you?'

'No.'

'Sorry, should have liked a look at my property all the same. In a safe place, though, I suppose?'

I nodded again.

'You are a real gentleman. Well, sir, as I reckon my score of good marks, I shall get out of here about the end of March, 188–. But I will give you good warning in time, so that you may have the property ready. Ah! have you seen Mrs. Wolfe lately?'

'Mrs. Wolfe?'

'Yes. Lady who gave evidence. Old Bailey?'

'No, how should I? By the way, who is that Mrs. Wolfe? I was curious about her.'

'Beautiful, ain't she? Every inch a lady, ain't she? Adorable, eh?'

He looked furious as he said these words. But suddenly his countenance became calm again, and he added:

'I don't know why I should laugh at the poor lady. She only did what any other lady would have done.'

'But you seemed to know her, you said.'

'All humbug, sir. Wanted to interest you in my case. Judge and jury were right. I merely wanted to crack that house. Chose it because I had been told it was worth while. Never knew anything about Wolfe, or Mrs. Wolfe before.

'Pon my honour! I am justly punished. But I swear it was a first offence.'

'And yet you had no excuse. You had money.'

The man put on a very penitent expression, and was about to reply, when the warder interrupted us, saying that time was up, and that the visit must cease. Backhouse was escorted back to his cell, after making me various signs, which I thought it advisable not to notice, and I was ushered out into the street, feeling infinitely happier than when I had left it. The last reason for mistrusting the lady, and for blaming my love as foolish, had vanished. What an idiot I had been, not to suspect that rascal of lying about her before! He, the vulgar thief, to be connected with her! It was too absurd. I was also very pleased with myself for the strength of mind with which I had conducted myself. The man had no suspicions at all. I should have abundant time to make good what I had already wasted by my work, or, still more easily, by marrying Mrs. Wolfe. It was annoying, certainly, that she had disappeared, but her last letter showed that her affection for me was as strong as ever. She had doubtless acted on caprice; besides, everybody was out of town just then. I should hear from her ere long.

I had made excellent resolutions to work, but felt too unsettled to put them into execution. I seemed possessed of a devil of extravagance, as if the one thing needful was for me to get through this fatal trust-money as quickly as possible, and, then, as soon as it was gone, to settle down seriously to work to replace it.

At the rate at which I was spending my money, it was not astonishing that before long I had come down to my last hundred-pound note and during that time I had refused briefs which represented fully double the sum I had been wasting. My clerk was in despair, and one day remonstrated so earnestly with me for destroying all the good my career had created for me, that I took his interest in my welfare for an impertinence, and sent him then and there about his business. I never went near my chambers, having nothing to do there, and fearing the silent reproach that there awaited me. I

heard casually, later, that my son had taken up his abode there, and had transformed my office into a luxurious bedroom after making a bonfire of my books and papers. I never however, took the trouble to verify this report.

Matters were beginning to look serious with me, when, by a piece of singular good fortune, I came into the possession of a sum of £1,200—a dividend paid to me out of an estate in which I had been interested. I had now fully the wherewithal to begin a new life, nor was it by any means too late to do so. I found that my strange conduct had attracted no attention whatever, as I had feared it might have done, and that those who had noticed my irregularities had condemned them on account of the several trials through which I had passed. The real busy season was at hand, there was abundant work to be had, and a good income to be earned, and all that I had to do was to give up my new and inhabitual follies, and to settle down once more.

And I still think I should have done so, had not, just at the moment that my resolution was at the point of being put into execution, a letter reached me, which threw me back into my old state, and was my final undoing.

It came from Mrs. Wolfe. It was dated from P——, near Honfleur, Calvados, France, and ran:

'Dearest Boy,

'Are you very angry with me? I could not help it. Shall I confess? I am in love with you, and I thought it better to run away. I knew you could never think of me—I am too old, and not pretty enough. It is true that all that bothering business is now finished, and that I am rich—very rich. But I knew you too well to imagine *you* could ever marry a woman for her money. So I went away, far away, to be distant from you. I do not think I shall ever return to England. But oh, how I should like to see you again—some day—some day! When will it be? This is a charming place. A tiny Norman village, and within easy reach of London. I suppose you are very busy now, and have no time for a holiday. I think this is all the news

I have to give you, and am ever, with true love and heartfelt regrets,

'Your devoted
'WOLFE.'

I never wavered an instant, I who all my life had been a man of indecision. I never wavered an instant, I say; but prepared at once to leave London, and all its chance of my rehabilitation, moral and social, behind me. I did not even take the trouble to write to the solicitors with whom I was then in relation, to announce my departure, or to make excuses. I did not return one brief. I read the letter over and over again, and kissed it, and then I set about my journey to France. I found that I could get a boat to Havre from Southampton that night, by leaving Waterloo station at 9 p.m., and I spent the few hours before me in packing my things. I did everything very methodically. There was an astonishing amount of method in my madness, and I set about this foolish expedition as if it was rendered necessary by reason and interest. I was careful to provide myself with a sufficiency of French money, and had even foresight enough to buy a novel for my amusement on the journey; also a pocket-flask, and a bundle of choice cigars. It had been my first impulse to telegraph to Mrs. Wolfe to tell her I was coming, but I decided to surprise her. I was quite a boy again. Indeed, I felt like one, glad of a holiday scamper, full of pleasant anticipations.

It had been my invariable habit to travel third-class. I had been able, I had calculated, during the twenty years that I had practised this economy, to save a considerable sum, that had been more profitably expended. This time, however, I travelled first. I had acquired habits of luxury. I did not take a return-ticket. 'I don't know whether I shall return at all,' I said to myself. I was in singularly high spirits that night, and chatted pleasantly with everybody who cared to listen to me. When the train got clear of London, I put my head out of the window and made a mock bow to the capital. '*Au revoir!*' I said, and laughed immoderately.

I felt very happy. I had got £1,250 in my pocket, had dined very well that evening, and was smoking a good cigar. I felt as blithe as the most careless Bohemian, and hummed to myself as the train sped along. I had no thoughts of the future, save that in a very short time I should see her again. Of my work, of my career (here the train whistled)—exactly. And Backhouse's money—a pretty reason to torture myself—a scoundrel like that!—stolen money, doubtless. If he ever gave me any of his nonsense, I would hand him over to the police; acquit my conscience later on by leaving such a sum to charity, *et voilà*.

The novel I had bought was of a class which a few months ago I should have been ashamed to touch—frivolous, sensual, and empty. But I had been serious and grave and self-restraining too long. It was high time I should have my fling, too. I walked about the carriage in my excitement; found the train moved onward much too slowly; beat my hands together.

At Winchester two gentlemen entered the carriage: one was a clergyman. I immediately essayed to engage them in conversation.

'Hope we shall have a pleasant passage,' I said.

'We are not crossing.'

'Ah! Ain't you? That's strange. What wind is it to-night?'

Neither answered. They were talking together in whispers.

I then picked up my book, much annoyed with these black-coated mar-joys. I pretended to be much amused at what I was reading, and laughed immoderately. The clergyman was evidently scandalized. He did not, by chance, think he had produced any effect upon me with his swagger about his lordship the bishop. It was very little I cared for the bishop, anyway.

'Evidently intoxicated,' I heard him say to his companion as they moved away together on the platform at Southampton. Intoxicated, certainly, with joy at being free from cant and routine and bilious melancholy. 'L'amour est

enfant de Bohème,' I hummed as we rolled down to the docks.

We had an excellent passage, and I slept soundly all night in my berth, and rose as fresh as possible next day. I had fancied that rest would wear off my excitement, and that remorse and misgiving would come, as they always do come, in the morning. But no. I was as merry as on the previous night; a little less feverish and exalted, perhaps, but gay and happy, and full of pleasant excitement. I had kicked over the traces, and enjoyed my liberty.

I found, on reaching Havre, that P——, the village where Mrs. Wolfe was staying, was situated on the highroad between Honfleur and Trouville, and that I could get to either of these ports by steamboat. I selected to go to Trouville, as it was the boat for this place that started first.

I reached Trouville at nine in the evening, and being too fatigued to continue my journey decided to pass the night there. I drove to the Hôtel des Roches Noires, and took apartments, a bedroom and a sitting-room. After a luxurious supper, I strolled out to the Casino along the beach. I found the Casino crowded. A concert was going on in the music-room. There were people sitting at little tables on the terrace enjoying the cool air; the baccarat rooms were thronged with gamblers. I took my seat at one of the tables on the terrace, and ordered a champagne-soyer. It was then my gaiety first left me. Ever since I had set foot in Trouville I had been haunted with the thoughts of my poor brother who so cruelly had lost his life in this place—let me see—only two years ago. Why, his body was found not more than a hundred yards from the place where I was sitting. There, near the boarded walk across the sands that leads from the Casino to the hotel. It may be that he sat here, just where I was sitting, on the very evening a few minutes before Death touched him on his shoulder. Poor fellow! Poor Richard. Perhaps if I had been a better, a kinder brother to him—— But what avail now? Why had I never sought to avenge his death, to drag his murderer to justice? Poor brother! I had been indifferent enough.

Yet the good, tender-hearted boy had left me all he possessed. That was nothing but debts, it is true, but still, how kind was the intention!

The champagne-soyer soon dispelled these melancholy thoughts, and after awhile, being in a happier frame of mind, and anxious for enjoyment, I arose and walked about the Casino.

The 'little horses,' or race-game, amused me so much that I played at it with varying fortunes until I had lost the best part of a five-hundred-franc note. I then went to the baccarat-room, where I won back my losses and about two hundred francs over. I was in high spirits when I left the Casino to go back to my hotel.

I had a kind of feeling that my brother had fallen murdered just here—about a hundred yards it was, along the boarded way. If it should happen that his spirit hovered around this fateful spot! Poor Richard! The sea, a sea of phosphorescent waves, came rolling in with dull roars, melancholy and prolonged. I felt nervous, and hurried along. The place was shamefully dark. Behind me the bright Casino with its far-off music. I turned round to look at it, I was not mistaken. There was a figure standing just on that spot. There had been nobody near when I had passed. Had it sprung from the ground?

'*Qui êtes-vous?*' I called.

'I don't speak French,' answered a voice.

'Is it you, Mrs. Wolfe?'

'Joe! Is that you?'

'Joe? No. Don't you recognise me? I got your darling letter, dear, and came. I wanted to surprise you. It's you who have surprised me. Oh! I am so glad.'

'But who are you? I seem to know your voice.'

'Look at me,' I laughed, and struck a light.

'Gracious! if it isn't my dearest boy!'

'Yes, dear. But who is Joe, may I ask? I am jealous.'

'Joe? What Joe?'

'You asked me just now if I was Joe.'

'Oh—ah—yes. But when did you come?'

'To-night.'

'Well, this is a surprise. How good of you! So you got my letter. Did you come by Honfleur?'

'No, by Havre. But this Joe?'

'Bother Joe! You dear boy, where are you staying?'

'I have taken apartments at the Roches Noires.'

'Naughty. You were in no great hurry to see me, then.'

'I could not get to P—— to-night.'

'No, perhaps not. You must come over in the morning.'

'Yes, I will. What is your address?'

'Oh—the Maison Gaillot. I have taken a small house there.'

'Maison Gaillot. Well, I have something important to tell you.'

'Well, you will tell me to-morrow, dear. I must go back to the Casino. I am over from P—— with a party of Americans. Joe is one of them. Such nice people. Mr. and Mrs. Jowe—J-o-w-e. Not Joe—J-o-e, as you seem to think. Made their acquaintaince at P——. Will introduce you to them. You are sure to like them. Don't forget to come to-morrow. And now I really must be back, as my friends will be wanting to drive back home to P——. It's a good way off—about eight miles.'

'Dora—Dora, may I kiss you before you go? Oh! Dora, think of all the way I have come.'

'Well—well. Just one. There! foolish boy. Now be off. Good-night.'

She tore herself from me and walked rapidly away towards the Casino. I looked after her until she disappeared from sight, and then to work off my excitement turned round and ran off home at full speed. I had a vague idea at the time that somebody was running after me; it was doubtless only the echo of my steps upon the boards. Yet curiously enough when I got within the range of the hotel lights this echo stopped. I took no notice of this, but ran on until I reached the house.

I had no inclination for bed, I was much excited by the rencontre I had had, and the first kiss. I asked my way to

the billiard-room. There was only one old gentleman there, who was practising endless canons. I proposed a game, which he readily accepted.

'I am Mr. Peilabout,' he said, introducing himself, 'the commissaire of police at Trouville-Deauville, at your service.'

Monsieur Peilabout played a much better game than I did, and was delighted thereat. He became very talkative.

'It is a very quiet place,' he said, 'at least, nine months out of the twelve. Just now, however, with all these Parisians and strangers here for the season, *dame!* there is plenty to do. Sometimes a duel to be stopped, the Casino to be looked after, pickpockets to be watched, and gambling to be put a stop to. Oh, I assure you, sir, I have plenty to do during this three months; and, *entre nous*, I rather like it. I am old but I am active, and I hate doing nothing like a limpet on a rock. Fourteen! Ah, but, *par exemple*, I don't want to live to see another such case as that of the poor gentleman who was murdered here two years ago. An Englishman, but so gentle and nice. We all liked poor Mr. Wilson. I assure you, sir, I had a great esteem for him, and I would readily have given—sixteen, seventeen—my ribbon to have been able to put my hand on the scoundrels that killed him. For I must tell you I have always maintained that there were two murderers. Garnier of the Parisian surety, insisted that it was the work of one man—nineteen—but I am sure I am right. Those Parisian detectives have too great an opinion of themselves. Ah, missed that time! Monsieur, it's your turn.'

'So you knew poor Mr. Wilson?' I said.

'Ah, well. Such a gentle, quiet fellow. I have played many games of billiards with him here on this very table, as it might be with you. It was a wicked shame, and my great sorrow that I have never been able to find out who the scoundrels were. A great pity, too, from a professional point of view, it would certainly have meant my promotion to Havre. But that was the least consideration, of course.'

## CHAPTER XII.

### WHAT ROGUES! WHAT ROGUES!

I was so excited with all that had recently happened to me that I did not feel the least inclination for bed, and was glad to stop in the billiard-room, and to allow myself to be shamefully beaten at the game by the garrulous police-officer.

At about half-past eleven o'clock, however, our game was interrupted by the hurried entrance of a man, who, after saluting the commissaire with great deference, drew him aside and whispered in his ear. This communication, whatever it was, was apparently a very important one, for the whispered conversation was much prolonged, and the old gentleman appeared to be greatly excited. At last, recollecting doubtless that I was present, he came up to me, and said:

'I must beg you to excuse me, sir, but some official duty of the very greatest importance calls me away at once. If I am fortunate enough to find you still here to-morrow night or the night after, I shall have the greatest pleasure in continuing our game. Pardon, monsieur!'

And so he went off, still whispering to his companion and largely gesticulating.

After that, I went to my room, and before going to sleep, arranged my papers, tore up the Backhouse account-book, which I had long since ceased to keep in order, and stowed away my banknotes in a drawer of a secretaire that was in my sitting-room.

I had ordered a carriage to drive me to P—— at eleven, but having once got to sleep, my fatigue possessed me, and kept me to my bed till long past noon. By the time I had breakfasted it was three o'clock, and I then heard, to my great disappointment, that I could get no carriage till the evening, as all those at the disposal of the hotel were engaged. I thought of walking, but abandoned this idea when I reflected that a long walk along dusty roads would

seriously impair the elegance of my costume, and I was anxious to present myself as beautiful as possible before my lady. Yes, amongst other qualities which had recently come to the surface, a vanity which amounted almost to foppishness was one.

I resigned myself accordingly to wait till seven. When this hour had come I had a fresh disappointment to meet, inasmuch as I was informed that the carriage could only be at my disposal for the journey out, as it was ordered to Honfleur to meet the evening train, and that I should have to return by foot. This was annoying; I hated fatigue. It could not, however, be helped.

It is a lovely drive from Trouville to P——, and at any other time of less preoccupation I should have greatly enjoyed it. The sea was in sight most of the way, and the country fresh and pleasant. I liked Villerville, nestling by the sea, and admired Cricquebœuf, with its old Norman chapel, covered with ivy and mirroring itself in the miniature lake that has taken the place of its former churchyard. And so on to P——. It was dark as we reached this little hamlet, and on every side the hedgerows were alight with glow-worms.

'Do you know the Maison Gaillot, driver?'

'No, but perhaps monsieur will get down here and ask of the cabaretière. It cannot be far off. And will monsieur excuse me now, as I am already behind time, and must hasten on to Honfleur?'

I dismissed the man with a handsome pourboire, and entered the cabaret, or taphouse designated. It was a cottage by the wayside opposite a small forge, where a smith was still at work by his blazing fire. A nasty little dog snapped at me as I entered. There were some Bohemians supping off black bread and cider at one of the tables. Opposite me hung a notice: 'On ne chante pas ici.' The cabaretière, a fat, red-faced woman, asked me what I wanted.

'I have a visit to pay to the Maison Gaillot; can you tell me the way?'

'Oh, certainly; the house belongs to me—I am Madame Gaillot. It is down a lane to the right, just before you get to the bridge, a little way along the highroad. But monsieur will perhaps not be able to find his way there alone, as he is a stranger and it is dark; I will send somebody with him with a lantern—or, stay, I will conduct him myself. Here, you,' turning to the tramps, 'be off now; it is closing time. Allons!'

The tramps grumbled but obeyed. When they had left Madame Gaillot fetched a lantern, locked up the house, and bade me accompany her.

As we walked along, she told me how pleased she was with the beautiful English lady who was her lodger; so amiable, so generous, and so also was Monsieur Joe.

'Monsieur who?' I asked.

But here we had come to the lane, which was of the kind known as a water-lane. A narrow path, and on the left a narrow stream—an awkward place for walking at night.

'Monsieur must be careful not to slip down the bank. This is not very convenient. I will go on with the lantern.'

I followed, much charmed with the picturesqueness of my surroundings. I was almost sorry when we reached the end of the narrow path, and once more entered a lane that was all terra firma.

'It is here,' she said, pushing open a gate, and ushering me into an orchard, which seemed to be also the farmyard.

'What an extraordinary place! Why, here is a pig!'

'Yes, monsieur; we are in the country.'

We passed through another gate and down an untidy avenue of trees. Then the 'mansion' came in sight—a square house sadly out of repair. To reach the front-door we had to go up about twenty stone steps. In front of the door was a tiny terrace surrounded by a stone wall. Madame Gaillot rapped at the door with the key.

'It's I, Jeanne,' she said to a girl who opened; 'I bring madame a visitor.'

'Is it you, boy?' cried Mrs. Wolfe from within.

'Yes.'

'Well, come in. I am in the kitchen frying pancakes. I expected you to supper. Merci, Madame Gaillot; and, I say, you may take Jeanne away with you; the table is laid. I shan't want her again to-day.'

'Bonsoir.'

'Bonsoir.'

'Well, boy, why don't you come in? Are you shy?'

'It's dark, and I don't see my way.'

'Ah, there.'

Here a door was opened and a flood of light illuminated the passage.

'Come in. No, I am not in receiving costume. Flour all over my arms. Not trim and neat as I used to be at Mrs. Worthing's. Spiteful, bothering Mrs. Worthing! No, you mustn't shake hands. You would make yourself quite white. Well, if you like, you may repeat the experiment of last night.'

It was an old cottage kitchen, very scantily furnished; a bright wood fire was burning on the open hearth. Some faggots of wood were heaped up in one corner; a huge press stood against the wall; on a table in the centre were various ingredients and utensils.

She looked very pretty in her country dress, flushed with the fire, her eyes sparkling, tossing the pancakes in the hissing pan.

'This is country life, as I understand it,' she added. 'You look surprised. You expected, I suppose, to find me living in some swell villa. No—you see what this is; I have the whole house for a pound a week, and I get milk and eggs, and, in fact, everything I want, from the farm-people hard by. It's a perfect Georgic, my life. When I want a little civilized life I go to Trouville.'

'With Monsieur Joe,' I added maliciously.

She frowned slightly.

'Yes, and with Mrs. Jowe and the Misses Jowe and the Masters Jowe.'

'Do you live here all alone?'

'I have Jeanne in the daytime.'

'Do you mean to say you sleep here in this house all by yourself?'

'Certainly. What should I fear? I have a calm conscience, and besides—— Tramps? Oh, I am not frightened of them. Besides, the Cordiers, the farm-people, are within call, and Father Cordier has a big gun.'

'Have you no arms?'

She held up her arms and laughed, and stretched herself with comfort at the fire.

'And do you cook your supper every night?'

'Oh no! I usually sup off bread and milk. To-night, as I thought you might come—and, naughty boy, you kept me waiting for you all day—I went in for extras. There is a cold chicken and a salad, and some fruit and the pancakes. Ah, but no wine; nothing but milk. But, if you are good, I will make you some coffee afterwards.'

It was very pretty to see her busy. I liked her much at her womanly occupation.

'You seemed surprised to see me work,' she said. 'Would you believe, I clean this kitchen myself. Couldn't you eat off the floor, and with appetite? Well—I like this simple life; I wish I had led it always; it would have been better for me if I had. Well, what is my boy thinking about so seriously?'

'I—I—I——'

'Well, what is it?'

'It is, Dora, that I have never admired you so much as to-night. It is that——'

'Now, you must keep that for after supper. Fancy a gentleman of your position making love to a cook. Fie! Hush, hush!'

Here she put her little hand on my mouth. I clapped mine on too, to hold it tight, and kissed it and kissed it.

She gave me a tap on the cheek.

'Go into the next room, and sit down to table. I will just wash the flour off my hands and then I will join you.'

'I would rather remain where I am. Hark! what's that?'

'What?'

'I know I heard a noise in the room above our heads. Is there anybody in the house?'

'Not that I know of. Rats, perhaps. I sent Jeanne away. No; I am sure there is nobody. And now run away into the next room. I won't let you stay here.'

The dining-room adjoined the kitchen, and formed with it the whole of the ground-floor of the house. It had one window, which looked out on the stone staircase. There were four doors: one into the kitchen, one into the passage, one dissimulating a cupboard, and the fourth opening direct on to the staircase which led to the rooms above. A round table, prettily decorated with flowers and tastefully spread, was in the centre; two chairs.

Dora joined me very soon, and we sat down and supped and chatted pleasantly.

'Now that you are the lady of the house once more, and have left the cook in the kitchen, may I tell you what I have come all the way from London to tell you?'

She looked down and was silent.

'It is,' I said, bending over the table and taking her hand, 'that I love you very dearly, Dora, and that I want to marry you.'

Still she said nothing.

'If I ever doubted of my love,' I continued, 'I know now, from what I suffered when you vanished and when I saw you no more, that you are all in all to me.'

A faint smile.

'Will you answer me, dear?'

'Have I not answered you long ago?'

'My pretty Dora!'

'Well, then that's settled. And it would have been settled long ago if you had spoken before. I have loved you ever since we first met. But there, don't let us talk of these things now. I will write to you to-morrow and suggest what steps we had better take about our marriage.'

'But I mean to talk of nothing else. I have been thirsting for your kisses too long. I will quench my thirst now.'

And talking to her of love and of our future, time slipped by. It must have been nigh on ten o'clock when I recollected that I had a walk of over ten miles before me. I started up.

'Well?' she said.

'It's time I was off,' I said, 'I have to walk back to Trouville to-night.'

'Perhaps Madame Gaillot could put you up at the inn.'

'In any case, it is high time I went, if only on your account.'

'I don't think it is late. What is the real time?'

'I don't know. I think it must be eleven o'clock. I left my watch at the hotel.'

'What a pity! And there's no clock here. I don't think it can be anywhere near eleven o'clock. Why, you only seem to have been here half an hour—

'"For lightly falls the foot of Time,
That only——"'

'Aye, but I should like very much to know the time, all the same.'

Here she turned round and went into the kitchen. This necessitated her speaking louder. It struck me at the time she spoke louder than the distance warranted.

'Oh,' she cried, 'my dear boy, I know. My watch is upstairs on the mantelpiece of my little sitting-room. Do be a good boy and run up and fetch it. It's the door that is straight in front of you as you reach the top of the stairs, and the watch is lying on the mantelpiece. Run upstairs and bring it to me, there's a dear fellow.'

I took one of the candles and went up the stairs. They were without carpet and creaked horribly. The paper was torn off the walls on either side in many places, and hung down in great untidiness. I found the door indicated and entered the room. It was as wretchedly furnished as all the other rooms in the house that I had seen. A small writing-table stood near the window, the shutters of which, I noticed, had been closed. There was some litter in one corner, paper, a coil of slender rope, some gardening tools. A chromo-

lithograph, the one called Devotion, I think, was pasted on the wall above the fireplace. I could hear the watch ticking on the mantelpiece before I saw where it lay. It was a large, old-fashioned watch with a heavy gold case. Scarcely a lady's watch. I turned it over. On the back some initials entwined were engraved. I examined these the while a very strange feeling came over me. No. I had not been mistaken. These initials were certainly C. R. W. entwined, and—— Why, of course, this was poor Richard Wilson's watch, the one that had been given him by my father! I remembered how angry I had been, and how I had wanted great-grandpa's watch for myself. It was given to Richard on his fifteenth birthday, and dear ma had given him a bat on the same day. How ever had this watch come into Mrs.——'

I was just turning round, greatly puzzled, with my brother's watch in my hand, when I heard a step behind me. The next moment I received a violent blow with a needle-pointed instrument on the back of my neck. If I had not started on hearing the step, this Lacenaire blow would have killed me. As it was, the weapon glided off, tearing my flesh cruelly. I turned round, still holding the candle, and recognised Black Joe. Before I could utter a cry, or move a finger, the brute closed with me and flung me to the ground. Then holding me by the throat, as he—I am sure it was he—had done in my garden, he dealt me a blow on the temple with his fist. I considered it good policy to pretend to be stunned, and lay quiet with closed eyes, whilst he ransacked my pockets. The only thing, however, which he took was my pocket-book. This he thrust into his breast.

He then shouted out: 'It's all right, Sal.'

Then he went to the corner and fetched a rope, and bound me hand and foot, till I was unable to move a limb. The ends of the rope he secured to a hook which was let into the back of the hearth. Then he gave me a kick, and went off downstairs, whistling.

'Well?' I heard Dora say.

'Well—I told you.'

'I didn't hear; I stopped my ears.'

'Very sensible that of you.'

'Eh, Joe; but I couldn't help myself. Well?'

'Well—what?'

'The fellow?'

'Stunned.'

'Not dead?'

'No; I don't think so. The awl slipped; so I stunned him with my fist, and tied him up. He's all right. Yes, and will be still allrighter by-and-by. When I think of the fellow kissing you, and I close by and not able to say a word.'

'And the money?'

'Oh, it's all right; we've got our hands on Backhouse's plunder after all. Well, it's been a job to get it. Hope that rascal upstairs hasn't been making free with it.'

'Nay, Joe, he's a gentleman.'

'Well, let's see.'

From the rustle of papers that I heard, I presumed they were turning out my pocket-book. It was so. In a minute or two I heard the man give vent to a torrent of oaths and curses; I almost pitied him, so great was his disappointment.

Then I heard a shrill scream.

'What's the matter!' swore the man. 'What do you scream for?'

'A great clot of blood has just fallen on my face. It's come through the boards. Oh! Joe, you have murdered him!'

'No, I haven't. But didn't you tell me to? Didn't you say I was to serve him out for poor Bill's death?'

'It's not that. It's because if the fellow's dead, there's an end to our getting Backhouse's money. If he's alive I can go on with the comedy.'

'Oh, he's alive right enough. There's only a little blood been let.'

'It is provoking. He always carried the money on him. I saw that with my own eyes. I was certain he would have it on him to-night. I suppose it is at his hotel.'

'Shall I go up and torture him—roast his feet—until he tells?'

'No; that's no use. He'd scream, and the Cordiers would hear. Wait.'

The same minute she came running up the stairs and into the room with a candle in her hand. I was lying on my side, with my back turned to the door, and there was a great pool of blood all round my head.

She stopped, and gave a little cry.

'He's dead! I am sure he's dead!' she said. Then she came on a little way. 'Oh!—all this blood! all this blood! —how can I get to him!'

At last she came close behind me, and bent over me and put her hand on my forehead. Then she pinched my arm. It hurt me dreadfully—a vicious, cruel pinch—but I mastered myself and kept silent. Then she put her dainty little hand on my mouth, and pressed it to my lips—I think it was to see if I was breathing. It was madness on my part, but you see, I loved the woman, and it may have been a wish for heroism and to show her that I loved her in spite of all, and that I was prepared to give her the proof of my love, even at the risk of death. I say it was madness on my part, that when she pressed her hand to my mouth I kissed her fingers, not once, but as many times as I could. She started, suppressed a scream, and then kneeling down by my head, regardless now of the blood, placed the light on the hearth, bent over me and looked me in the face. Our eyes met.

'Well, what the —— are you doing up there?' cried the man from the foot of the stairs.

She gave me a look of warning, pressed her fingers to her lips, and then bent her face down to mine and kissed me full on the mouth. Love had conquered even her perverse and vile heart. Then she rose up and ran away downstairs just as her companion was coming upstairs to see what was going on.

'It's all right,' I heard her say. 'He's as stunned as a brickbat.'

'Well, what shall we do? Are we going to give up that twenty thousand pounds?'

'No! no! no! As he's stunned he knows nothing about what's happened. He won't know I have had anything to do with this, and will be as gone on me as ever. You just tie me up anywhere here in the kitchen, and presently, when he comes to, I will call out to him, and tell him I have been attacked, and have just recovered from a fainting fit, and then I'll get myself untied—you mustn't tie me too tight—and go up to him and loosen him—and then—well, leave the rest to me. Now I come to think of it there's no need for you to tie me up at all. But you must be off at once. Yes, take that money and get away to Havre. I will write to you when I want you. After the comedy I will play, he will refuse me nothing. Now be off!'

'What, and leave you here with that fellow — to have him hugging you, kissing you, and perhaps marrying you!'

'Nay, you needn't be frightened. What with Backhouse first, and then Wolfe, I have had husbands enough. But be off—he may come to his senses any minute.'

The man seemed to hesitate. Finally he went, after threatening and swearing.

She waited until he had been gone ten minutes, and then came swiftly upstairs to me.

'He has gone,' she said. 'You need fear nothing.'

She cut the rope that bound me, and helped me to my feet. Then out of the room into the next, and fetched a sponge and bathed my wound, and bound it up with linen.

'Are you well enough to listen to me, sir?' she asked, after she had led me to a chair and made me sit down.

I nodded my head.

'You are a good man, and I see that you really love me, and I am still woman enough to be pleased, and proud of such love as you showed me. I wish I was worthy of such love. You know the wicked wretch that I am. I am glad, though, you kissed my hand, because, if you hadn't, and you hadn't touched my heart as you did, loving me and caressing me, in spite of all, there would have been more wickedness

done here to night. Black Joe is a very bad man. I am a bad woman; but that is, perhaps, more the fault of the way in which I have been brought up; and yet, God knows, I have tried to escape, over and over again, and to lead a new life. When I heard that Backhouse had murdered that man at Trouville to rob him, I ran away from him, and worked like a servant for my living. Then old Wolfe offered to marry me, and I accepted him. I knew Backhouse would not dare to say anything because I knew of the crime he had committed, and I had the watch he stole from the man he killed. Backhouse soon found out where I lived; he left me quiet enough for some time, but at last wanted me to come back to him and to leave old Wolfe. It was to get back the watch, which I held as evidence against him, that he tried to break into my house the night he was taken. Then old Wolfe died and I was left penniless, for all I told you about his having left me rich was a lie. We knew that Backhouse had put his money into your hands for keeping, and we wanted to get at it. You see, as his wife, I had more right to it than anybody else, and I didn't like to think of twenty thousand pounds being in a stranger's pocket, when I was wanting. We weren't certain it was twenty thousand pounds, but the pals said so. It was the money he stole from the man he had killed. The man had been gambling at the Casino, and had won an enormous sum. And that is why you have been attacked so often. If I had known how you love me, I do not think I should have treated you as I have done. I trust in you, though, that you will not betray any of us. You see I saved your life just now, and then, you still love me, do you not?'

Then she paused. After awhile she cried:

'I am mad! I am mad! Why have I told him these things? He will betray us!'

'You need have no fear, Dora,' I said. I have suffered temptation myself; I shall be silent. The man that was murdered,' I added, 'was my own brother; I might well avenge him. It is my duty. But I will be silent.'

'Then Backhouse's money is your money?'

I made no answer. I was sick with pain, and felt dead with shame. Yes, it was my money that I had been wasting, and mine also the time, the honour, the scruple. And my love, there it was before me. It maddened me to find that in spite of all her vileness I still found her so beautiful, so desirable. I was then hopelessly weak, that even now, in the den in which she lived with her convict paramour, in the hovel in which the murder of my own brother had been planned, and where my own had been attempted, this woman, monster in all but face, should still appear to me a desirable and lovable presence, she who was still stained with my blood.

She spoke again :

'You cannot stay here,' she said. 'Black Joe may come back at any moment. He is so jealous of me that he——'

'How dare you ! How dare you !' I cried, staggering to my feet, and raising my hand as if to strike her. 'How dare you speak to me of him and his jealousy ?'

She started back and screamed, but not, as at first I thought, in terror at my feeble menace. I turned, and saw that the ruffian had returned.

'Ah, that's it, master, is it ?' he cried, advancing towards me. 'I thought that there was something between you two. Run away together, will you, and spend Bill's money far from the pals ? We'll see about that, though.'

So saying, he advanced upon me, with his two hands outstretched. At the same moment the woman threw herself between us, and cried :

'No, Joe, you shall not harm him. He saved you—he loved me—you shall not kill him ! Are you a man ?' she cried, struggling with him, while I, weak with loss of blood and paralyzed with horror and disgust, reeled helplessly against the wall.

I remember seeing her thrown aside with a blow, and then his rushing at me. I put out my hands feebly to ward him off. The moment that he got his hands about my throat, I saw a rush of men into the room, and the next moment I fainted away.

When I recovered, I found myself in the yard, being helped into the farmer's cart. A few minutes later I was jolting on my way to Trouville. The commissaire of police sat by my side, and kept repeating:

'Oh, the rogues! oh, la canaille!'

I remember turning my head after awhile, and then I saw four mounted gendarmes. Between the first two walked Black Joe; between the other two was my poor pretty Dora; both had cords round their arms, the ends of which were looped to the saddles of the guards. There was my love, and here was I. Yes, brave commissaire. 'What rogues! What canaille!'

Oh, the horror of that night!

It was not till I had got back to London that I heard that the whole gang had been taken. I hope Dora does not think that it was I who betrayed them to the Trouville commissaire, but I fear she does. Backhouse will never come to claim his money now.

He was convicted of the murder of Richard Wilson, and was hanged cursing me. When in the witness-box—the story of how I had spent the money that he had entrusted to me was made public—he cried out: 'Thief, thief, thief!' and no one spoke to silence him.

The evidence against Dora and her associate, Black Joe, broke down as far as complicity in the murder of my brother was concerned; but they were afterwards handed over to the French police, and after a trial for attempted murder and other offences which were laid to their charge, were sentenced to life-long imprisonment. They will meet out in New Caledonia, and will, doubtless, be married there. I did all I could at the trial in Paris to exculpate Dora and Joe, for Dora's sake, but my particular case was only one of a series of crimes which they had committed in France, and conviction was inevitable. Dora kissed her hand to me as she was being removed, and the man shook his fist menacingly.

It was my money I had been embezzling and spending. My wickedness was none the less wicked. And, God knows, I have been punished. Less, indeed, by the loss of all—of son,

and house, and treasures, and position, and career—than by the sense of shame that haunts me night and day. Nay, let none of us be led into temptation, for those who think themselves strongest are often the weakest, weak as I was.

And Lucy?

I had a letter from her a few days ago.

'I hear you are ill and poor, and can work no more, and are unhappy. They tell me you are the ghost of your former self. I am still the Lucy you knew, and love you now as ever. We would hang the Corot in its old place, which seems very bare without it.'

I have not answered this letter yet, and I do not know if I ever shall. I am not worthy of her; I am worthy of nothing but contempt and shame. I do not know which of us, Dora who is in prison, Joe who is a convict for life, Backhouse who is mouldering away in a felon's grave, or John Wilson, who writes these lines, is the worst. I had advantages of fortune that these other wretches had not. How should I have acted in life if I had been poor and an outcast as they were one and all, and temptation had beset me as it did them? I will wait and see how I come through the new time of trial that is before me. I am poor, and shall remain so for long, for the revelation of the trial and all the scandal have closed my profession to me for ever. There is, however, prospect of my being able, thanks to the kindness of friends, to earn a sufficient living. If, as it may be, I find myself worthier and stronger after a time of trial, then I may perhaps answer this letter. I know that the writer will wait always for my reply.

But in the meanwhile, Master Commissaire, 'What rogues! what rogues!'

THE END.

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